

ULTIMATE Quest '25

north central football netball hockey
loddon valley football netball

Let the season begin



INSIDE

North Central, Loddon Valley faith in future with junior initiatives

Hockey set for Diamond Jubilee

The star recruits, key cogs and legends in season 2025

Your guide to the season's games

SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT TO THE

LODDON HERALD
FREE EVERY THURSDAY

 **NORTH CENTRAL NEWS**
St. Arnaud, Charlton, Wedderburn & Surrounding Districts Est. 1964

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Glad to be back! Let the new season begin

Part of a very special social fabric

THIS Saturday sees the return of football and netball in the Loddon Valley and North Central leagues, with great anticipation of a closely fought year in both of the competitions.

There is change in the North Central league, with Calder United making its debut after being formed from the amalgamation of Nullawil and Wycheproof Narraport.

The Lions have already had a season of cricket to help bed down the sometimes tricky task of reconciling two clubs with different cultures, and two groups of supporters, some of whom may be resistant to embrace change.

The consensus is that Calder United will become a powerhouse of the competition, but perhaps not immediately.

Sea Lake Nandaly is pushing for its third football flag in a row, and faces stiff challenges from Birchip Watchem, Wedderburn and the Lions. Boort, too, is tipped to be very competitive.

Donald has seen a massive turnover of its playing ranks since making the finals last season, and may be destined for a tumble down the ladder.

St Arnaud has recruited strongly, while Charlton is determined to rise from last spot on the table.

In the Loddon Valley, Marong will be hunting its fourth premiership on the trot, and has new co-coaches to replace Linton Jacobs, with threats to its supremacy led by Pyramid Hill.

The Bulldogs inflicted Marong's only two defeats in three seasons last year, but fell short in a brutal and windswept grand final.

Bears Lagoon Serpentine and Bridgewater make up the rest of a seemingly set top four, but other clubs are building to try to challenge the best.

Inglewood looks stronger and Newbridge will fight to maintain its fifth placing from last season and wants to upset the status quo at the top of the ladder.

Maiden Gully has recruited well and Calivil fought out fifth spot with Newbridge all last season, so they too go in with high hopes on improvement.

Mitiamo will have modest ambitions after being winless last season, but a new coach in Luke Lougoon brings optimism.

On the netball side, player numbers are booming in both leagues, and the rivalries are strong.

Mitiamo will defend its premiership in the Loddon Valley, with Pyramid Hill still likely to be its most testing rival.

Wedderburn is a juggernaut in North Central netball, and with wily new coach Susie Lockhart at the helm will be the team to beat in 2025.

And North Central hockey will have a very special milesatone ... 2025 marks the 60th year of competition.

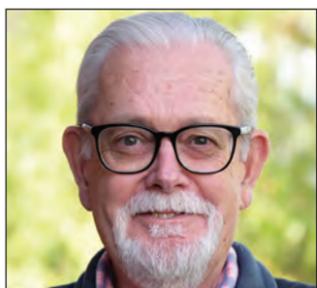
A new season brings new stars to the region in both football and netball. We're glad it's back.

- GARY WALSH

READ ABOUT YOUR CLUB

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Gary Walsh ... the writer with the sporting words



EXPERIENCED sports journalist Gary Walsh has spoken to the clubs, observed the trends and crafted the articles for Ultimate Quest '25.

A former journalist with AFL media and award-winning travel writer, Gary retired to the region during COVID ... a break from decades in the media and communication industry before accepting a role of sports writer with the award-winning Loddon Herald 12 months ago.

Gary has brought his experience and depth to sports reporting across the North Central and Loddon Valley regions. He covers football, netball and cricket and every other sport played in local communities.

Along with regular writers and correspondents for the North Central News and Buloke Times, Gary is part of the region's committed team reporting on local sport every week where the news of local communities and local people are to the fore.

SPORT intrinsically strengthens country communities and none more so than across the North Central and Valley where clubs are the standard bearers for the hopes of our towns and districts.

Football, netball and hockey will be the fore over the next five months as colours that have generated pride in communities for generations are donned once more.

Fierce rivalries on the fields and courts, ringed by supporters travelling barrack for sons, daughters, neighbours and friends.

Good sports during the game and greater friends after the final siren has sounded when players and supporters gather to discuss much more than sport - there's the trends in farming, achievements in schools and community.

Winter sports are the lifeblood connecting our people, pumping a heartbeat that benefits the wellbeing of rural Victoria.

As it has been since those first games of football played on the goldfields and any available paddock more than 150 years ago, your local newspapers report the fates and fortunes every week of local clubs and players.

This special supplement - Ultimate Quest '25 - is a collaboration of three local newspapers committed to their communities. Local newspapers the share the ups and downs of daily life with you and are equally consumed every Saturday when we all gather to enjoy a day of sport.

The Loddon Herald, Buloke Times and North Central News are local businesses invested in our towns every week sharing with readers that snapshot of sport, helping you celebrate or look to a better result next week.

We thank the North Central and Loddon Valley leagues and associations and the clubs who have supported our collaborative Ultimate Quest supplement. Like the clubs, we too need support to ensure the news is published very week. We are three small but proud local newspapers and we hope the spirit of co-operation between our three businesses reflects those same bonds that tie the sporting communities across our regions.

Come September, there will be premiers in each of the codes and across the playing grades.

But, every week your local newspapers will be there for every community. We're part of that very special social fabric that can only be found in our part of the world.

Chris Earl
Managing Editor, Loddon Herald

Robin Letts
Editor, Buloke Times

Peter Marland
Publisher, North Central News

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STATE OF THE JUNIORS

Building the numbers

OFFICIALS from both the Loddon Valley and North Central leagues have made it clear that junior development and ensuring that young players have a defined pathway to senior representation is a critical part of the leagues' future.

That goes for football, netball and hockey, although football is seen as the sport most under pressure for junior numbers.

The problem was illustrated recently when Newbridge's bid to field an under-18 team in the Loddon Valley competition this season failed when the club was unable to find enough players to make a side viable.

It was a blow to new Loddon Valley president Richard Hicks and his revamped board, who declared after being elected this year that junior sport was the league's number one priority.

Junior players have been hard to find in the Loddon Valley, with only five teams competing in the under-18 competition last season — one of those being the East Loddon Rams, created by the merger at junior level of Calivil, Bears Lagoon Serpentine and Mitiamo.

In just their third year in the league, the Rams won the premiership last season.

The combined side gave an opportunity to players from those three teams to show their wares in a local junior competition, but



ultimately it may be unsustainable as a template.

Maiden Gully failed to field an under-18 team in 2024 and its senior side was initially penalised 12 points as punishment, although that was eventually rescinded after the Eagles protested.

Maiden Gully will return this season, and Hicks says Newbridge is very confident a junior team

will be able to enter the league next season. An innovation in the Loddon Valley this season is under-12 little league-style games at half-time in senior matches.

During the 2024 season, AFL Central Victoria and the North Central league met with junior club coordinators to evaluate the best ways to support young footballers.

Their efforts have focused on

understanding expected player numbers for 2025 and beyond, identifying potential gaps, and ensuring that all junior footballers in the region had access to a competitive yet enjoyable football experience.

Sea Lake Nandaly junior coach Joel Donnan shared how the club reconciled giving less gifted players a role in the game while the more talented were challenged and were able to develop their skills.

In practice, this involved having discussions with the opposition coach before a game to rotate and lend players in the hope to create a more balanced game.

Cameron Tomlins from AFL Central Victoria agreed that development was crucial: "By creating strong, accessible junior programs, we not only encourage participation but also ensure that junior to senior pathways are filled with local players who are passionate, skilled, and ready to represent their communities."

"These junior players are the future of our local senior clubs, and without their participation, the very heart of our clubs will struggle to thrive."

NAB AFL Auskick is the key entry point for young footballers aged 5 to 12, teaching the basics of the game and improving their skills over weekly sessions.

Traditionally it has been run on Saturday mornings, but increas-

ingly Auskick centres have been finding times that may be more suitable to their communities.

For example, Inglewood Primary School hosted a six-week Auskick program after school finished, while at Wedderburn local sports stars Adam and Maddi Postle are coordinating a Thursday night session.

AFL Victoria running a school holiday program at Charlton Park on Tuesday, April 15, from 9am-3pm, with six hours of football activities. The cost is \$55, and kids will go home with their own football and other giveaways.

There are a host of Auskick centres in the Loddon Valley and North Central areas: Inglewood, Marong, Maiden Gully, Bears Lagoon Serpentine, Pyramid Hill, Wedderburn, Boort, Sea Lake, Charlton, St Arnaud and Donald.

Loddon Valley FNL board member and netball coach Shasta Maher said junior numbers were strong across the competition, with only two clubs unable to field mini sides,

Junior hockey has well-established junior pathways, with mixed under-12 players then moving to mixed underage competition before becoming eligible for senior men's and women's.

North Central's under-12 level will have eight teams this season, and hockey association president Janelle Barbary said the competition was thriving.

FROM Auskick to Net-Set-Go, youngsters across North Central and Loddon Valley communities are enjoying being part of local Saturday sport and special mid-week events promoting participation in sport



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NORTH CENTRAL HOCKEY



CHARLTON'S 2025 coaches Mathew Thompson, Kelly Wright, Poppy Fitzpatrick, Annie Olive, Brooke Thompson and Julie Bourke.

Diamond year to sparkle

HOCKEY is looking strong in the North Central region, with Wedderburn fielding a men's team this season, setting up a seven-side competition for 2025.

It will be the North Central association's 60th year and officials are planning celebrations for the milestone.

The return of the Redbacks in the men's competition is one of the pre-season boosts for the competition.

The Redbacks will be coached by veteran Steve Giorlando, whose family name is synonymous with hockey in the area.

Steve's daughter Shelby is representing North Central at international level, having toured Thailand and Malaysia in January with the Australian Under-21 Country team, the Wattles.

Steve, Shelby and her older sister Sam all played with Wycheproof Narrarport last season, with the men's team finishing run-

ners up and the women's team winning the premiership.

Their return to Wedderburn is expected to boost the Redbacks' chances in both senior competitions.

Shelby was available only for a handful of games last season given her premier league, state and international commitments, while Sam was named as a defender in the North Central team of the year.

The Redbacks hope Shelby will be able to appear in a few local matches amid her busy schedule.

Wedderburn is also entering an under-12 team, boosting that competition to eight sides, but it will be unable to field an underage team.

At senior level, merged club Calder United will be an interesting team to watch.

Essentially, it is Wycheproof Narrarport

in a different playing strip, given that Nullawil, the club with which Wyche has merged in football, netball and cricket, did not field hockey teams.

Calder is likely to be a strong contender in the men's competition, with reigning premier Donald something of a question mark after losing some key players to retirement.

Boort is also predicted to be an improver in the men's comp.

Charlton finished on top of the ladder in the women's competition, but went out in straight sets in the finals, leaving Wycheproof Narrarport and St Arnaud to fight out the grand final.

Taking the reigns again in 2025 to guide our future hockey stars are Kelly Wright and assistants

Poppy Fitzpatrick and Annie Olive will collectively coach the Minkey teams this season.

Brooke Thompson, Club Secretary and a respected role model for our youngsters, steps back into the Under 12's coaching position following a prelim birth in 2024, hoping to take the team one step further.

Julie Bourke, club life Member and stalwart supporter of the club enjoys the challenge of coaching the Underage Team and will again continue to build on the teams previous successes.

Julie believes that 2025 is their year to shine.

Calder is predicted to be hard to beat, while Charlton will be keen to assuage last season's finals disappointment.

Matt Thompson will coach the men's team, while the experienced Julie Bourke will lead the women's side, and hopes to pull on the boots again after a brief retirement.

St Arnaud had a successful 2024 with

all four teams making the finals and the underage and under-12s winning the premiership. The women's team, which made the grand final from fourth spot, will have Sophie Male as coach and Edward Parry will coach the men's team.

Junior hockey is booming, with North Central Hockey Association president Janelle Barbary saying the development of clear junior pathways is having a significant impact.

Young players can represent North Central at a regional and state level and can be selected for elite hockey academies, which gives them encouragement to stick with the sport.

Barbary said the association also held a hockey roadshow this year, with presentations and training sessions at local schools conducted by senior coaches.

"The opportunity is there now for country kids to really develop their skills," she said.

Young players are about a 50-50 split between boys and girls, giving the association confidence that the future is bright, especially as underage and under-12 teams in North Central are mixed.



St Arnaud's 2024 underage premierships side



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BIRCHIP WATCHEM

Coach: Meghan Noonan and Stacey Hamilton Last season: Fifth Best and fairest: Jenna Angel

Bulls and Angels

BIRCHIP Watchem just missed reaching the A Grade finals last season, finishing fifth with eight wins, six losses and two draws.

Had those two draws been turned into wins, the Bulls would have finished fourth ahead of Nullawil.

So, it is clear the team is there or thereabouts, and has the potential to push higher on the ladder this season.

The Bulls have a star of the competition in shooter Jenna Angel, who scored more than 500 goals last year aged 17 on her way to a share of the spoils as North Central best-and-fairest.

She is set to stamp her dominance on the court again in 2025.

Birchip Watchem has recruited strongly from a range of different leagues.

Family links have been strengthened with the signing of Mackenzie Ryan and Lauren Robinson, who have close connections to the club.

Maddy McQueen and Emily Hotker have joined the Bulls from the courts of the Wimmera FNL, with McQueen most recently playing at Horsham Demons and Hotker at Minyip Murtoa.

Kimberley Phelan has played with Beu-

lah and Southern Mallee, Sophie Parfrey played for Hawkesdale Macarthur in the Mininera and District league and Amy McEachern arrives from Canberra.

New local residents Issy Atkins and Zoe Wilson will also donned the purple kit for the first time.

Atkins' netball background includes the first team at Geelong Grammar, while Wilson has played for Dookie United and Tooleybuc-Manangatang.

The club said both players had been standouts at pre-season fitness sessions.



Keeping it in the family, the Bulls have signed two player with deep connections to the club.

Lauren Robinson comes from North Bendigo and Mackenzie Ryan from Irymple, and both have links with Birchip Watchem's Ryan clan.

Lauren is the partner of Bailey Baxter,



Jenna Angel shoots to success for the Bulls

who is nephew of club president Brad Ryan, son of former Birchip netballer Joanne, and grandson of Shorty and Bev Ryan.

Mackenzie is the daughter of president Brad's twin brother, Andrew, who is a dual senior football premierships player for Birchip Watchem. She is also the granddaughter of Shorty and Bev.

Mackenzie played and coached at Irymple, and in her early 20s is a welcome addition to the Bulls' playing roster.



The Bulls have one of the emerging stars of North Central netball in Jenna Angel joint winner of the league best and fairest last season in her first full year playing in the A grade team, and collected a swag of club awards.

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BIRCHIP WATCHEM Nickname: Bulls Coach: Ash Connick Premierships: Two Last season: Second
Best and fairest: Nick Rippon Top goalkicker: Ben Edwards (102)

Star signing will sit in coach's box

THE BEST recruit last season's runners-up Birchip Watchem have picked up in the off season won't play a game for the Bulls.

However, the new kid on the block might be the difference between coming second and winning the flag.

New coach Ash Connick comes with an amazing record from the powerful Bendigo league, where he led Sandhurst to the premiership last season.

He has coached Bendigo and Sunraysia inter-league teams, and been at the helm of senior teams since 1999.

It seems an unlikely thing for such a well-credentialed coach to step down a level to a true country league — but that's what attracted Connick to the Bulls job.

"When I met with half a dozen people from the club who travelled to Bendigo to have a chat, I was struck by their passion for the club and what they wanted the club to be in the longer term," he said.

"I could tell the club was about the town and the community."

Since his arrival, Connick has been working on strategies to try to eliminate "the little things" that he found when looking at videos of the side.

In the case of premiers Sea Lake Nandaly, he said the Tigers executed the "one-percenters" better on grand final day, but is convinced there is little between the two sides.

The club has retained full-forward Ben Edwards, who kicked

102 goals last season as has been in good pre-season form.

Joe Reid will continue to play in attack this season after impressive form up forward in 2024, while Connick praised Dale Hinkley and Lachie Ryan for their pre-season efforts.

He said Hinkley was one of those players who seemed to have more time than others, while he declared Ryan "will have a big year".



Still only 28, Ben Lakin from Horsham brings class, experience and great leadership to the Bulls lineup.

He has played with Horsham throughout his career from a junior level, has won numerous best-and-fairest awards and been named as best afield in grand finals.

A new challenge spurred him to transfer clubs and leagues.

Lakin's commitment to his new club is clear — even when he hasn't been able to train for one reason or another he has driven from Horsham to encourage his teammates at training sessions.

He will slot into Birchip Watchem's back six, and may even see some midfield time.

Ash Connick, his new coach, said Lakin "is just going to make the others better."



The Bulls win over arch rivals Sea Lake Nandaly

"When players are really good people and really committed that is the ultimate, I guess."



Full-forward Ben Edwards kicked a century last season after narrowly falling short in the previous year, when he finished with 87 goals.

He reached the landmark in Birchip Watchem's win over Sea Lake Nandaly in the second semi-final, managing the feat of kicking at least one goal in every match of the season, including the eventual grand final loss to the Tigers.

Almost 200 goals in two seasons is a brilliant return from the former SANFL player, who appeared five times for Port Adelaide's state league team in 2019

having previously played with Glenelg.

While most of his appearances with Glenelg were in the reserves, he did play a handful of senior matches from 2014-2018.

Edwards was also a regular in the SA Country Football champions representing regional teams.

The Yorke Peninsula product is looking good for another prolific season after an impressive practice match hit out in which he kicked five goals and cursed himself for dropping a few marks.

BACK STORY

Birchip and Watchem, as separate entities, were both founding teams of the North Central football league in 1930.

Birchip left the league in 1937 because of an odd policy to play matches on a Wednesday afternoon, although Watchem chose

to stay. The two clubs merged in 1997 and as an amalgamated team won premierships in 2001 and 2022.

Birchip were previously the Swans, and had just two flags to their credit in 1986 and 1994.

Watchem had already merged with Corack in 1945, having earlier merged with Litchfield. No premierships were won under any of those arrangements.

Jim Brennan won three Feeny medals as a Watchem Corack player in the 1940s and 1950s, while Ron Lunn won the first of a hat trick of medals for Birchip in 1954. Watchem Corack also saluted the judges of the best and fairest in 1962, 1963, 1968, 1972, 1974 and 1988, while Birchip players won the medal in 1982, then in three consecutive years with different players from 1984-86, as well as in 1994.

The new creation, Birchip Watchem, has collected five Feeny medals.

Birchip Watchem Football Club thanks all its sponsors and volunteers for the 2025 season.

BIRCHIP-WATCHEM BULLS



Together we charge!

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BOORT

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Coach: Carly Isaac Last season: Third
Best and fairest: Carly Isaac

Carly has new goal

ONE of the north central region's most versatile sportswomen, Carly Isaac, takes over as Boort's A Grade coach for 2025, with the B Grade coaching job thrown in.

Isaac – the reigning Queen of the Mountain in the famous run up Mt Wycheproof carrying a bag of wheat, and a top-drawer marathon runner – is a true multi-tasker.

The star centre won the club best-and-fairest last season as well as the Coach's Award, and was named the Loddon Herald Sports Star of the Year.

Georgia Haw has stepped down as coach after six years to take over the club presidency and is confident the Magpies have been left in good hands.

Boort finished second on the ladder after the home and away matches in 2024 but

fell out of the finals with two disappointing losses to Wedderburn and Charlton.

Eventual premiers Wedderburn beat the Magpies three times last year, so there is an awareness that significant improvement is needed.

Two former stars in Sophie Perryman and Stephanie Wilson have returned to the fold in a boost to the team's prospects.

Isaac is confident Boort can contend in season 2025 after its straight-sets finals exit.

"We probably had a few key players out of the side, having babies and things like that," she said.

"We've got a few back this year, and I'm really positive about the season," Isaac said.



Coach and key cog
Carly Isaac

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Sophie Perryman returns after a year playing with South Bendigo, and along with another former Boort star in Steph Wilson, who is back after having a baby, will give the Magpies a significant boost.

Perryman has previously represented the North Central league at junior level, and is considered one of the competition's rising stars.

With a background as a personal trainer, Perryman is supremely fit and can run all day, making her a difficult opponent to match up on.

Add elite skills and leadership, and she shapes as a critical player in Boort's bid to turn around a disappointing finish to 2024.

Carly Isaac's elite fitness – not to mention her netball skills – makes her one of the most potent players in the North Central league.

The only question is whether taking on the A Grade and B Grade coaching roles will impact her on-court performance.

She is confident that with the off-court support she will get that the job will not to be too much to ask.

Isaac says she will spend time off the court each match to give some of the rising juniors playing time. It would also give her the chance to see the game unfold from the bench. "There's probably going to be a bit where I have to coach from the sidelines and take it all in,"

Our physios are treating in Boort on a Tuesday and Thursday – call to book in an assessment, or visit our website and make an online booking today.

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Boort has depth and experience down through the grades including Kirsten Gooding

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BOORT

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Nickname: Magpies Coach: Dale Cameron Premierships: 3 Last season: Sixth
Best and fairest: Jhye Baddeley-Kelly Top goalkicker: James Keeble (32)

Exciting additions

WITH some canny recruiting and having retained most of last season's key players, Boort is seen by many as a big improver this season.

Coach Dale Cameron is of the view that the Magpies should have made the finals last year and is confident his side can mix it with the big boys in 2025.

Kayne Rutley is an intriguing recruit straight from the Calder Cannons in the Coates Talent League, who is the son of assistant coach and former player Andrew Rutley.

He played 13 times last year in the elite under-18 competition and also played for Keilor in the Essendon District Football League's junior division.

Rutley played as a small forward in the junior league, but at 180cm may have a more prominent role with Boort.

He also has an enormous leap, so he shapes as an exciting addition to the side.

Rutley's brother Tyson also joins Boort from the EDFL, part of Cameron's stated aim of having onboard players with a solid connection to the club.

East Keilor's Peter Barbopoulos is another recruit from the same league, slated to boost the forward line.

Most exciting of all is the addition of Carlos Egan, a former member of Essendon's Next Generation Academy who has played VFL football with Essendon and trialled with Collingwood's VFL squad over the summer.

Boort's key re-signing was reigning best-and-fairest Jhye Baddeley-Kelly, who was a revelation in his first season in the North Central league.

He has been appointed as one of Cameron's assistant coaches for 2025.



Midfielder Jhye Baddeley-Kelly's impact on Boort in his first season was plain to see, with a club best-and-fairest award, and third place in the Feeny Medal for the league's top player.

His win in the club award was massive, tallying 78 votes to win by 32 over fellow midfielder Tom Potter.

Baddeley-Kelly was playing good football for Coburg in the VFL in 2022-23, fronting up against many AFL senior-listed players.

A 24-disposal game against the Box Hill Hawks for 104 AFL Fantasy points, followed by a 25-disposal outing against Collingwood in 2022 highlighted his potential.

He dominated at suburban league level with powerhouse club North Heidelberg, where AFL games record-holder Brent Harvey still plays, kicking 30 goals from 11 games in 2023 while also representing Coburg.

At just 28, Baddeley-Kelly is in the prime of his career and will play a critical role in Boort's fortunes this season.



Carlos Egan has the skillset to be an instant success in the North Central competition.

Considered unlucky not to have been drafted to the AFL, the small forward has played in



Boort's coaching team of Dale Cameron and Jhye Baddeley-Kelly

the VFL and was highly rated in the Coates Talent League playing with the Calder Cannons.

In 2022, the highlight of his season was a six-goal haul against Eastern Ranges in the semi-finals, a return which saw him named as the best player afield.

Quick, skilful and with a clear eye for the goals, Egan played last season with Strathmore in the EDFL, which has proved a goldmine for the Magpies recruiting team.

Having just turned 21, Egan is primed to make a difference up forward for Boort.

And his talent was apparent early, with a win in the EDFL under-13 competition's best-and-fairest award in 2017.

He is small in stature at 167cm, but strong for his size at around 70g.

BACK STORY

Boort Football Club was formed in the late 1880s but it took until 1925 for premiership success to come in the short-lived Gladstone Football Association when the team beat Mysia.

In 1937, playing in the Mitamo league, Boort again won the flag, defeating Pyramid Hill in the grand final.

Premierships in the Korong league came in 1949 and 1950 be-

fore Boort joined the North Central competition.

The Magpies beat Wycheproof in the grand final in 1954, only their fourth season in the league.

Then followed a long period starved of success until 1982, when Boort thrashed Wycheproof Narraport to take the flag.

The club's third premiership came in 2008 with a win over Wedderburn. The legendary Tony Southcombe, one of the great country footballers of his era, won the Feeny Medal in 1981.

Another country great in Ron Best took out the goal kicking award for Boort with 100 majors in 1981, contributing to his astounding career total of 1919 goals.

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ULTIMATE Quest '25

north central football netball hockey
loddon valley football netball

CALDER UNITED Nickname: Lions Coach: Coach: Meg Hogan, Lauren Thompson
Last season: Nullawil: Fourth Wycheproof Narraport: Eighth

Lions can pounce from den on debut

EXPECT a powerful debut season for the Calder United Lions in the North Central netball league, as Nullawil finished fourth last year, while Wycheproof Narraport came eighth on the ladder.

Nullawil won the premiership a year earlier, so the nucleus of a strong team is there.

The same challenges that confront the football team will face the netballers — blending the two squads being the chief of them.

As with the football, most of the focus has been on putting together squads at all levels from the standalone sides rather than recruiting from elsewhere.

A Grade coaches Meg Hogan and Lauren Thompson have the task of creating a cohesive team to play at the top level.

Hogan is coming off a league best-and-fairest award in 2024 and will again play a key role on court in defence, while Thompson will marshal the attackers.

Thompson said the bringing together of the two clubs began with deliberate decision not to recruit from outside the league, apart from returning former players or those with connections to the towns.

Expressions of interest were requested from Nullawil and Wycheproof Narraport players, with 39 signing up to join the amalgamated club.

Thompson said young people generally embraced the new reality, while some of the older generation were a little reluctant or downright opposed to the merger.

“There were probably 10 or so in Wyche and Nullawil who said they would never follow the new club.

“The majority have since been sighted at training runs and practice matches.”

Overall, Thompson said: “The vibe has been positive on and off the court.”



Co-coach of the Lions Meg Hogan comes to the new club with last season's league best-and-fairest trophy proudly in her hands.

A stellar goal defence, she will form a key partnership with the returning Laura Sheahan.

Hogan was ranked in Victoria's top 100 country netballers last season as she powered her way to the Nullawil B&F award to go with her league honour.

Still very young, her leadership skills have led to her entering the coaching ranks before her time.

This season Hogan will share the Calder Lions coaching duties with Laura Thompson.

She will look after the defenders and Thompson will focus on the attacking players.

Tough and relentlessly focused, Hogan's impact on the new team is certain to be a positive one.



Laura Sheahan played in the 2019 premiership side with Nullawil as goal defence and she returns to the amalgamated

side as one of only two signings from outside the merged clubs. After the COVID disruption she joined the Mallee Eagles in the Central Murray competition, where she was named as captain last season as the team made the finals.

Now she has returned to her old club as it enters a new era.

Sheahan is described as “a dominant defender who trains like she plays”.

Her leadership skills are highly regarded, and she is seen as a perfect mentor for 17-and-under defenders moving up to the senior grades.

Just as importantly, she is a down to earth character whose presence in the club rooms is treasured.

Sheahan is married to Brent Sheahan, who will play for the Lions this year as well. Along with Meg Hogan, she will form an impressive defensive duo.



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north central football netball hockey
loddon valley football netball

ULTIMATE Quest '25

CALDER UNITED Nickname: Lions Coach: Darryl Wilson, Jordan Humphreys
Premierships: Nullawil: 1. Wycheproof Narraport: 19

Talent to challenge

THE great unknown of the North Central 2025 season is how the league's new club Calder United will fare.

Created by the merger of Nullawil and Wycheproof Narraport, there undoubtedly will be teething problems as the two groups of players come together, along with new recruits to be integrated into the structure.

Formerly rivals, even the supporters have to adjust to a new and possibly awkward reality.

Calder has done its best to create a unified culture, running bonding camps and actively promoting the new club on social media, always with a respectful nod to the former clubs.

Home games will be shared between Nullawil and Wycheproof in another effort to smooth the transition.

Talent wise, the Lions should be a strong on-field force, having brought together the best players from teams that finished fifth and seventh last season.

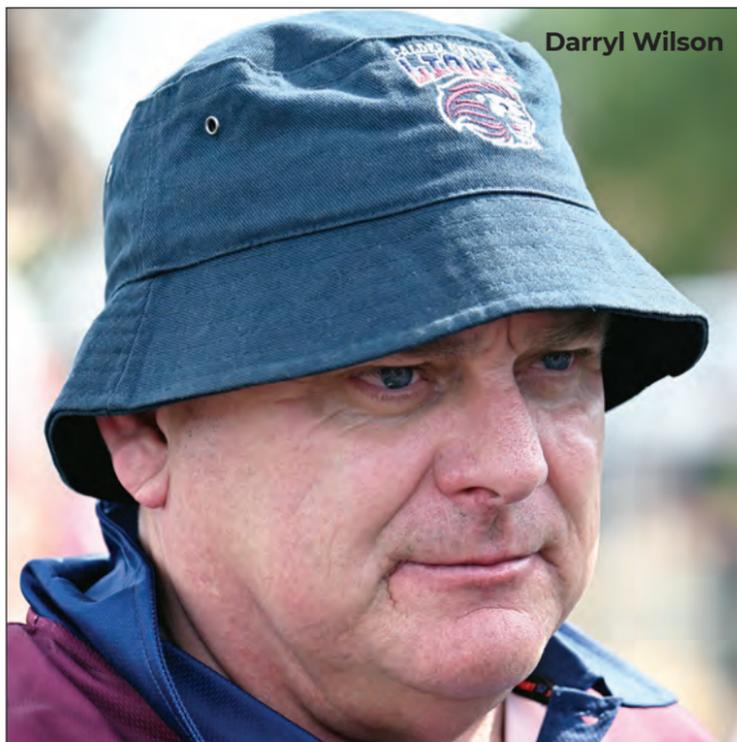
Club president Ricky Allen says the second half of the season should see the team at its best.

The captaincy will be shared between Rylee Smith, a Nullawil player last year, and Koby Hommelhoff from Wycheproof Narraport.

Nullawil's Jordan Humphreys will be the on-field coach, while vastly experienced Darryl Wilson, a premierships coach at Colbinabbin and Strathfieldsaye, will coach from the bench. Wilson coached at Nullawil last season with Humphreys as his captain.

Humphreys is only in his early 20s, which tells you how highly the club rates his leadership.

Practice match form against the likes of Marong and Bridgewater suggests the Lions have enough talent to challenge the league's best, Sea Lake Nandaly



Darryl Wilson

and Birchip-Watchem. How well the players gel is the big question mark.

Wilson said having the two cricket teams merge successfully for the season just finished was a great template for the football club.

"Going early was a really great thing, because the hardest part is getting to know each other," he said.



With talented ruckmen at a premium in country football, Calder United was thrilled to sign last season's Nullawil best-and-

fairest Dean Putt.

Putt was on Richmond's AFL list as a rookie, and although he did not play a senior game, time spent in that elite environment has helped make him of the best big men in the competition.

He also trained for a pre-season with Hawthorn before joining Queensland powerhouse Southport.

Last season Putt, who stands a towering 200cm, took out the Nullawil B&F despite playing only 13 games.

The previous year, Nullawil's first in the North Central League after transferring from the Golden Rivers competition, he played 17 matches and was named among the best players 13 times.

Coach Darryl Wilson said the new combine's tall options had

been limited, with a number of players leaving after last season, so Putt was a crucial signing.



With so many active local players to choose from, the Lions have been selective with their outside recruiting.

Kobe Lloyd, from Balranald in the Central Murray League, is a strong-bodied midfielder with a background of elite football as a junior.

He played at Bendigo Pioneers in the Coates Talent League and with GWS Giants in the national under-18 competition, testing himself against many players who went on to fine AFL careers.

At under-16 level he was selected in the All-Australian side, and played in an international rules match against a South African team.

He was considered by many experts to be unlucky not to be drafted to the AFL.

Last season at Balranald, Lloyd played 17 games and was named in the best players 10 times.

He will add skill, toughness and leadership to the onball brigade.

BACK STORY

Calder United inherits the genes of three former clubs — Nullawil, Wycheproof and Narraport.

Wycheproof and Narraport merged in 1964 and quickly became a dominant team in the North Central league, winning

19 flags, including two in its first two seasons in the competition.

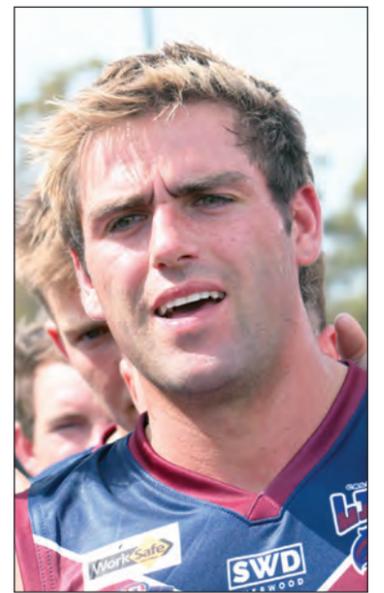
The most recent win was in 2018.

Wycheproof had won two premierships as a standalone club, and Narraport just one, so the potential for Calder United is plain to see if the team can meld successfully.

Nullawil only joined the North Central competition in 2023 after departing the Golden Rivers league, where the team had taken out seven flags from 1998-2022.

And so, the Wycheproof Narraport Demons and the Nullawil Maroons have become the Lions.

The most prominent VFL/AFL identity to emerge from the teams is Merv Keane, who had a distinguished career with Richmond, playing in three premierships, and went on to various coaching appointments as well as taking up a senior position in Essendon's recruitment department.



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CHARLTON

north central football netball hockey
loddon valley football netball

Coach: Leah Smith Last season: Runner up
Best and fairest: Kate Burton

Leah wants versatility

LEAH Smith returns to Charlton as coach to lead a team that lost in the grand final to all-conquering Wedderburn last season after finishing third in the home-and-away season.

The club was riding on a wave of emotion in 2024, with the season dedicated to the memory of young star Maddi Fitzpatrick, who died after a battle with cancer.

Leah says it will be several weeks into the 2025 fixture before she will have a real sense of where the team lies in the pecking order, given a lot of movement between grades.

Some top-age 17-and-under girls will be using into A Grade, guided by older heads who remain in the senior grades to provide guidance and a sense of stability.

Among those will be Lacey Smith, the coach's daughter who is a mid-court player, and Sarah Blair.

Both are still 17, with Blair also taking on the job as co-coach of the 14-and-under team.

Last season's best and fairest Kate Burton will not play this season, with work, home life and travel from Bendigo conspiring to make it too difficult for her to return to Charlton.

But the door remains ajar for her to play if circumstances permit.

Versatility is the key for Smith: "Our main goal is having flexibility in players. We want to be as versatile as possible to be able to adjust to anything that might be thrown at us, or that I might throw at the girls."

While making the finals clearly is the aim, she says building

on club culture and developing younger players in a major focus. "If we don't get there, but see improvement I will feel that we have been successful."



Claudia Lee and Megan Brunt will provide stability in A Grade, with their experience and leadership offering continuity.

Goal attack Lee was runner-up in the A Grade best-and-fairest last season, and will help to coach the 14-and-under as well as assisting the Leah Smith with the senior squad at training, which shows her importance to the club.

Brunt has the versatility that the coach prizes with her ability to play goal keeper, goal defence and wing defence. She has been promoted to the leadership group for this season, but Smith says both players will step up again this season and provide leadership throughout the club.



Claire Smith has moved from Queensland with her footballing partner Declan Ryan, with her versatility expected to be a great boost to the A Grade team. Her position on the court will be a week-to-week proposition depending on the opponent the Navies are facing.



Leah Smith

Predominantly a tall defender, Smith is also adept as a goaler, so she can comfortably swap ends during a contest.

Coach Leah Smith says her new charge will be swapped about in the first few weeks of the new season as the A Grade team becomes familiar with new structures and settles into a rhythm.

■ Anika Holmes-Brown and Stella Nicolson is the NetSetGo Coach's for season 2025 who will be guided by the experienced Rach Smyth.

Claudia Lee and Sarah Blair are the newly-announced under-14 coaches. Sarah successfully played in many senior games last year and earned her spot in the A

Grade grand final team. A familiar face to Charlton has come on board as the under-17 Coach this year with Holly Thompson taking on the role.

Yet another familiar face is local Jac Leslie, the new C Grade coach. Chloe Walsh will continue to lead the club as president as well as lead the A Grade side.

CHARLTON FEEDLOT

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Q

uest '25

north central football netball hockey
loddon valley football netball

CHARLTON

Nickname: Navy Blues Coach: Mitch Collins Premierships: 13 Last season: Ninth Best and fairest: Mitch Collins Top goalkicker: Chris Cavanagh (12)

Goals without a ceiling: Collins

IT WAS a long and hard season for Charlton's senior football team in 2025, with just one draw to offer reward for effort.

But second-year coach Mitch Collins is confident the Navies can improve this year, with a half a dozen recruits and the natural improvement expected from the young players who made their senior debuts in 2024 under difficult circumstances.

As with other clubs in the league, Charlton has lost a number of Melbourne-based players.

"That is where we are at as a club," Collins says.

"But in the long term, by us bleeding the young kids and giving them a real crack, it can only improve the side."

Collins, who took out the best and fairest award last season, says he is not putting a ceiling on the team's prospects for the coming season.

"We want to be around the mark of being more competitive, and pushing ourselves against the best sides."

Collins sees premiers Sea Lake Nandaly, runners up Birchip Watchem, Wedderburn and new side Calder United as the likely benchmarks.

"Now that we are all training together we can really start to work on our game plan," he says.

Elliott Fitzpatrick is seen as a potential star as he enters his second season in the seniors, having graduated from the under-17s.

Collins describes him as "very brave" and says his football skills stood out in a difficult year with his efforts across the half-back line.

Skilful ruck Ben Lanyon was

another player Collins says is expected to step up, having been runner up in the B&F and awarded the rising star trophy.

And as for running half-back Sam Woods, Collins says frankly: "We'd be stuffed without him. He is so courageous and puts his body on the line every week."



Ashton Wood has arrived at Charlton from Murrabit in the Golden Rivers league as a powerful midfielder with a lot of upside.

He has a family connection to the club, which is important to coach Mitch Collins as he tries to build a cohesive group.

Wood, while primarily a midfielder, can also play in defence and on the forward line.

Collins said Wood would slot straight into the seniors, likely in a midfield role, after impressing with his elite fitness and "training the house down".



Mitch Collins is happy to play down his influence on the Navies.

Talking about the pace of his young side, he says: "All the boys are relatively quick, apart from myself."

Lack of speed may be an issue

for the captain-coach, but he will continue to shoulder a huge burden as Charlton's best player.

Collins joined the club last season from Kangaroo Flat in the Bendigo league, with an impressive record there and earlier at Cohuna Kangas and Maiden Gully YCW in the Loddon Valley competition.

A young and struggling side needs the leadership and stability of a senior player at the helm, and Collins' best-and-fairest award last year shows his ability to blend the coaching and playing roles with success.

BACK STORY

Charlton was established as a football club in 1880, and joined the North Central league in 1940, celebrating its first season in the competition with a premiership.

The 1940s brought more success in 1946 and 1947, with another flag in 1950.

A long drought was broken in 1966, before two premierships came in the 1970s and another pair in 1989-90. This century has seen four more wins, in 2003, 2005, 2009 and 2016.

Feeny Medal success has been elusive, but the club won the award in 1969-71, with Tom Speedie winning two of them. Other medals have been celebrated in 1985, 2000, 2006 and 2019. Phil Bramley won the goalkicking award three years in a row from 2002, kicking more than 100 majors in 2003 and 2004.



We want to be around the mark of being more competitive, and pushing ourselves against the best sides

- Mitch Collins

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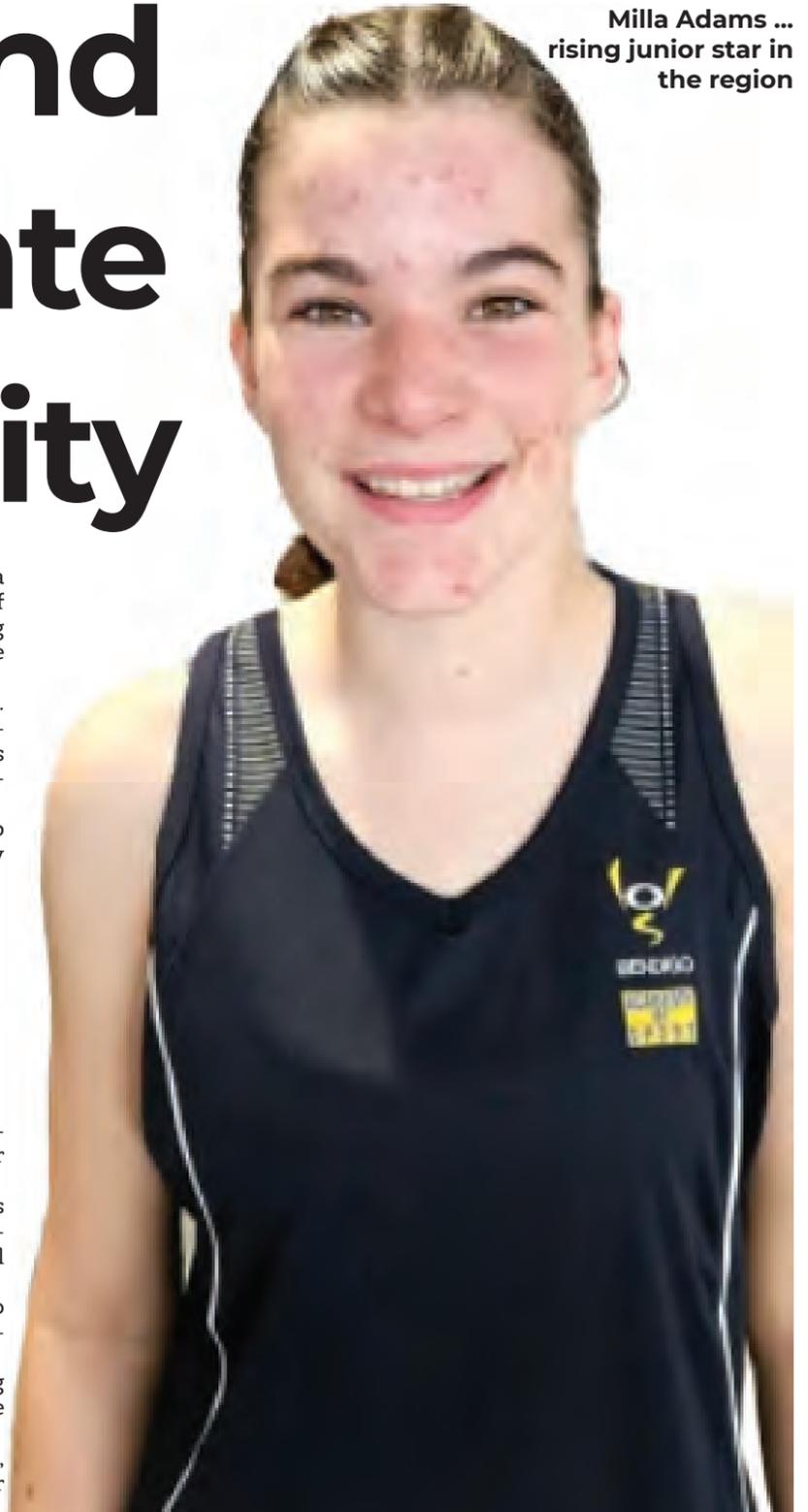
DONALD

north central football netball hockey
loddon valley football netball

Coach: Xanthi Rice Last season: Seventh
Best and fairest: Scarlett Funcke

Rising stars and stalwarts create a new versatility

Milla Adams ... rising junior star in the region



DONALD will be fielding six teams in the competition this season, with the club particularly excited by the number of juniors who will play.

Xanthi Rice will coach the A Grade "for about the 20th year", she said, among a miss of experienced and new leaders.

Last season's best and fairest Scarlett Funcke has moved to Brisbane and a traineeship with the AFL Lions, but she will play when back in Donald, including in the first couple of games of the year.

The Royal Blues just missed the finals last season, with a couple of narrow losses proving costly.

With some new recruits and juniors moving up, Rice said there would be great versatility in the side, along with defensive stalwarts Ally Doak and Sara Adams.

Milla Adams, Sara's daughter, is tipped to be a star of the competition, and will step up into A Grade in 2025 despite being just 14 years of age.

Experienced players Anna Sudolz, Rachel Meulendyks, Tori Kelm and Olivia Wollermann have joined the club and are expected to play key roles.

junior depending on where she was needed. Milla has been nominated for the Bendigo Academy of Sport's 2025 squad, designed to develop young talent "transitioning into the 15-and-under age group and Netball Victoria Talent Academy".

Or, in Milla's case, becoming a key senior player.

She has also been named in the Wimmera Mallee 15-and-under team for the state titles, and was best-on-court in Donald's 14-and-under premiership last season.

Sara, her mother, will be on the court to help the young star as she sets out on what looks likely to be a stellar career.



Anna Sudolz has been brought over from Rupanyup in the Horsham District league to take over a major role.

Highly rated for her intercept abilities, she has the capacity to play in a variety of defensive positions, and brings leadership skills to the Royal Blues.

Sudolz was a key player in Rupanyup's run to the grand final last season, which they lost narrowly.

She played as a junior at Redan in the strong Ballarat league, where she polled well in the 17-and-under best-and-fairest award in 2021.

Blessed with elite speed as well as endurance, she shapes as a significant long-term asset for Donald.



Not to put any pressure on Milla Adams, but her precocious ability makes her a critical part of the Donald team going forward.

She made her A Grade debut last season, playing three games at the age of 13, and will be a permanent fixture in the senior team in 2025.

Her versatility is important, with coach Xanthi Rice saying that she played in every position as a

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DONALD

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Nickname: Royal Blues Coach: Daniel Pearce Premierships: 13 Last season: Fourth
Best and fairest: Andrew Browne Top goalkicker: Blake Grant (23)

Royal Blues put faith in youth

THE TYRANNY of distance has hit Donald hard this season, with the club losing most of its Melbourne-based players.

The big turnover of personnel will see the Royal Blues relying more heavily on local players, and in particular juniors who make the step up.

Coach Daniel Pearce is realistic about the challenges the team faces after finishing fourth last season.

The young Donald team will quickly find out where it sits in the pecking order, with a first-up clash at home against likely strong contender Calder United, followed by a trip to play Birchip Watchem.

Many of the city players were friends who came from the Keilor area, and Pearce said that once one player decided to leave "you lose a lot".

He said many had been making the trek weekly for up to four years, and the travelling eventually wore the Melbourne-based players down.

"No one left because they were disgruntled and the current players understand why they left."

Pearce is excited with the opportunity now confronting the young players.

"More kids who were young players last year will get a good crack at it," he said.

"It will be good to see if they are up to senior footy."

While not ruling out finals, Pearce said he hoped "to win a few games" and to "make the kids better".

He wanted Donald to be "a tough team to beat".

Robert Walker, a full-forward from Horsham, is a key acquisition for the Royal Blues after they lost last season's top goalkicker Blake Grant, who has moved to the Surf Coast.

The club has retained a key player in Dyson Bell-Warren, who Pearce said had the speed and skill to play almost anywhere on the ground, and veteran Ross Young.

Donald is looking inwards for its new talent, and Jett Adams is one player who the coach believes has the potential to be a star of the competition.

He has been around the club since under-13 days and in the past couple of years has been given a chance in the seniors while still playing reserves football at times.

Adams was best-afield in Donald's practice match against Avoca despite having had a disrupted pre-season.

"He really shone out, so hopefully we can turn him into a good senior footballer," Pearce said.

"We're looking at him to be a 10-year player for the club on the wing or running off half-back."

Pearce's accession to the coaching role was a strange one, stepping in shortly before last season when Josh Potter resigned for personal reasons.

In another year of significant change, Pearce will have to be the constant who keeps things on an even keel.

Donald welcomes to the club Callum Van Den Driest who has family connections with current player, Dyson Bell Warren. Callum recently played with Tweed Coast Tigers in the QFA, and over a hundred games in his youth for Palm Beach Corrumbin in the Junior AFL.



Donald welcomes to the club Callum Van Den Driest who has family connections with current player, Dyson Bell Warren. Callum recently played with Tweed Coast Tigers in the QFA, and over a hundred games in his youth for Palm Beach Corrumbin in the Junior AFL.

BACK STORY

Donald was formed in 1882 and was an inaugural member of the North Central league in 1930.

Football success has tended to come in clusters. Flags were won in 1936, 1937 and 1939, 1979 and 1980, 1992 and 1993, 2002, 2004 and 2006.

In the pre-World War One period, Donald played in a number of "trophy" matches and then, as clubs tended to do, moved around between various leagues and associations before landing in the



In a depleted squad, the coach stands as a beacon of continuity for the senior team.

Daniel Pearce's on-field leadership will be a critical factor for the young players to follow.

Pearce believes his presence on the ground and his ability to educate the players on the spot will help the younger ones develop their craft.

He will have to be a teacher to



WHAT more can be said about Ross Young? Now into his 40s, Ross shares the honour with his father on winning NCF's Feeny Medal.

Other notable achievements are best and fairest in the WAFL (Sandover Medal), Uni Blues, VAFA (Woodrow Medal).

Before the 2007 season, Ross was rookie drafted by AFL Club Carlton, where he made his senior debut in round six against St Kilda, going on to play six games with the Navy Blues.

North Central competition. The Royal Blues have had great success at an individual level too.

Club legend Wally Shearer, who won the Feeny medal in 1948 and 1951, also took out a top goalkicker award.

Hugh Delahunty, who played with Essendon and became a Victorian MP, took home the Feeny in 1976.

Others followed in 1978, 1979, 1983, 1985, 1987, 1992, 1997, 2004, 2010 and 2015, with Ross Young the most recent winner in 2022.

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Coach: Dylan Perri Last season: Eighth
Best and fairest: Georgia Taylor and India Griffiths

Saints are showing the signs

WHILE the Saints held up the rest of the ladder last season, A Grade coach Dylan Perri says he is optimistic about the prospects in 2024.

The squad started training early in January and had an encouraging practice match win over Minyip Murtoa.

While the club has lost last season's equal best-and-fairest India Griffith from the mid-court, Perri says former player Lucy Gorrie, who is returning after a few seasons away from the club, shapes as an excellent replacement.

His view is had the season continued on in 2024, St Arnaud would have sneaked a few wins as improvement had been notable throughout the year.

"I want to see the girls continuing that upward trajectory in the new season.

"Our goal is to make finals — the top four."

Perri says dynamic defender Aleisha Petrie — "a great hunter and ball-getter" — will play after having a baby at the end of the season.

Her commitment to the cause was plain to see, playing out the 2024 year before having her child.

Perri says Petrie missed half of the pre-season but had returned in recent weeks "full guns blazing".

While Petrie is not especially

tall, Perri says she has a knack "for going for the ball at the right time.

"She loves the game, and loves to get out at training."



Goal shooter Georgia Taylor, who shared the Saints' best-and-fairest award last season with India Griffith, is a remarkable netball story.

Now 40, she only started playing the game a few years ago as a social outlet.

Unlike most players who come through the junior ranks, perhaps having started in the Net Set Go program, Taylor began her career in her last-30s.

Her rise has been nothing short of stunning.

Coach Dylan Perri describes her as "a really strong shooter, and I'm really impressed with how she sets herself up in the ring.

"In past years we have struggled to get the ball through the ring, so Georgia has been an amazing player for us."

Of Taylor's unusual career, Perri says "she fell in love with the game, and instantly had really good game-smarts".



Centre Lucy Gorrie is a key signing for the club after the loss of equal best-and-fairest winner India Griffith.

She played as a junior with St Arnaud and has returned at the right time from playing at Maiden Gully in the neighbouring Loddon Valley league last season.

Perri says she is an extremely fit player "and she can run and run and run".

Gorrie also played with Strathfieldsaye in the Bendigo league in 2022.

She is likely to be the main change to the A Grade lineup in season 2024 for the Saints, but has the advantage of knowing some of hew new teammates from seasons past.



Georgia Taylor and Dylan Perri

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ST ARNAUD

Nickname: Saints Coach: Scott Driscoll Premierships: 11 Last season: Eighth
Best and fairest: Harley Durward Top goalkicker: Mitch Egan (9)

Rising tide lifts all ships

ST ARNAUD'S senior squad has got through "a mountain of work" in pre-season to ensure they are fitter and able to run out games better in 2025, according to coach Scott Driscoll.

He identified periodic drop-offs in matches last season as the key reason the Saints struggled, finishing second last on the ladder with just two wins.

However, there are high hopes surrounding the club this season as the experienced Driscoll moves into his second year of leading St Arnaud as playing coach.

He is reluctant to single out any players as having impressed him in the pre-season, instead focusing on the collective: "The rising tide lifts all ships," Driscoll said.

"It's not a matter of two players standing up."

Fitness was identified as something that needed improving so the team could remain in games longer.

"Our main focus is playing a consistent four quarters, because we had periods where we dropped off last year," he said.

Ultimately, Driscoll wanted to build an environment that gave former players a reason to return, and for new recruits to be enthusiastic about joining the club.

Character was what he looked for in a recruit, having played at clubs that brought in quality players who were not high quality people, with a result that the atmosphere turned toxic.

"One of the selling points we have to recruits is that we have a very unified group," Driscoll said.

Last season's best-and-fairest winner Mitch Egan will captain the side jointly with veteran Kurt Tormey, the two having been chosen by the players.

Brad Organ, the winner of the B&F in 2023, returns after a season lost to an ACL reconstruction in a boost to the team's onball brigade.



While not new to the club, Brad Organ's return to fitness and to the football field is a huge fillip for St Arnaud.

He is, in effect, a fresh recruit after missing last season with a knee injury sustained in the final round of 2023, and brings great talent and leadership to the young group.

Organ has played in one practice game, and coach Scott Driscoll said he had come through that test well.

"He had a good impact and really showed his strong work ethic," Driscoll said.

"He has come back into the fold and really driven our standards."



Winning the club's best player award in his first season showed the impact Organ can have on the field.

At just 23 and after just one season with the Saints ruckman Zac Phillips is a barometer for the team.

With experience in the SANFL playing with the Eagles, he still has a lot of upside to come despite already having a crucial role.

His teammates voted Phillips into the leadership group for this season, which is a mark on the impact he has made on the squad.

Coach Scott Driscoll described him as "a quality young ruckman who is very hard working."

"He's also a quality guy, and the boys feel very lucky to have him."

Driscoll said the quality of ruckmen in the North Central league was the best he had seen at country level, and Phillips could hold up his head with the best of them. He finished runner-up in the club best-and-fairest award last season.

BACK STORY

St Arnaud Football Club was established in 1877 at a meeting held at Cox's Royal Hotel where 35 members joined up.

The colours were blue with white and blue stockings and red and blue caps. The first game played by St Arnaud in July 1877 against Charlton East on the Market Reserve.

After periods spent with various local leagues and association, St Arnaud was a founder member of the new North Central league in 1930, winning the first premiership.

In fact, the club won the first four flags — the league went into recess for a season in 1931 — and established itself as a powerhouse.

In all the Saints have won 11 premierships, the most recent in 2015.

The Feeny medal has been won by a St Arnaud player seven times, including in 1975 by Jim Jess, who went on to join Richmond and play in the Tigers 1980 VFL premiership win.

Chris Wall won the award twice, in 1990 and 1991.

Saints players have won the goalkicking eight times, most spectacularly in 1998 when Bruce Hando kicked 119 goals.

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SEA LAKE NANDALY

Coach: Nakia Nunn and Jodi Cox ast season: Sixth
Best and fairest: Gabby Munari

Defender heads new recruit list

The Tigers A Grade team couldn't match the feats of the senior footballers, finishing sixth with eight wins and eight losses for the 2024 season.

Staunch defender Gabby Munari took out the best and fairest award ahead of centre Ebony McLean.

Four of the team's A Grade netballers have taken on coaching roles, and player numbers are strong across the board.

Junior netball is thriving at Sea Lake Nandaly, with senior players mentoring the younger players and building a strong foundation for the future success of the club.

Prue O'Sullivan, just 13, as been selected for the Bendigo Academy of Sport 2025 team and named a training partner for the Wimmera Mallee State Titles U15 team.

The club says she is challenging senior players at training, proving she's a force to be reckoned with early in the season.

Dayna McKenzie, a star with the 17-and-under team, was named the first recipient of the league's Maddi Fitzpatrick Youth Incentive Award, named for the richly talented young Charlton netballer who passed away last year after a battle with cancer.

As well as playing in the junior ranks, where she won the best-and-fairest and best-in-finals awards, she appeared last season on the bench for the A Grade side and is expected to push for senior playing time in 2025.



Milli Seward joins the Tigers from the Mildura Demons.

An accomplished defender, her leadership credentials are strong, having coached junior premierships at Mildura.



Seward has spent all her netball career with Mildura, so may take some time to gel with her new teammates and a different environment.

However, the Tigers are confident she can become a key cog in the A Grade side, with her leadership and mentorship skills expected to quickly come to the fore.



Ash Roberts has been a Sea Lake Nandaly stalwart for many years as a versatile and dedicated defender.

She has been renowned at the Tigers for giving her all on the court, but the club reports that it recently discovered a hitherto unknown versatility in the determined veteran.

Roberts' adaptability and skill will be tested this season as the A Grade coaching team prepares to switch her about the court as play dictates.

Adding to her netball credentials, Roberts is also a key player for the Tigers' women's hockey team.



The legend Ash Roberts (top) and the 2024 C Reserve premier Tigers

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SEA LAKE NANDALY

Nickname: Tigers Coach: Billy McInnes, Bryce Delmenico Premierships: Four
Last season: Premiers Best and fairest: Wade Donnan Top goalkicker: Josh Jenkins (50)

Do it again, say Tigers

SEA LAKE Nandaly is pushing for a third consecutive premiership in the North Central league, with a sense that the challengers are coming fast.

The Tigers haven't rested on their laurels after their second flag on the trot, holding onto key players and doing some selective recruiting to boost the squad.

Oscar Brownless, the son of Geelong legend Billy, is the biggest name among the new players, and is set for a debut in round one against Wedderburn.

Most importantly, the club has retained Feeny Medalist and club best-and-fairest Wade Donnan, who dominated the competition as Sea Lake Nandaly swept to the flag in 2024.

Co-coach Billy McInnes will pull on the boots again this year, along with his partner Bryce Delmenico.

Their experience will help what is still a young side, albeit a talented and successful one.

McInnes said Brownless was potentially a star as a midfielder-forward, and his experience in an AFL environment was make his presence around the club a bonus for younger players.

Former Adelaide and Geelong star Josh Jenkins will play again when his media commitments allow, and McInnes expects the full-forward to be available for about half of the matches.

McInnes says that after two premierships in a row the players are "as hungry as ever. They know how hard it is to win one, so there's been no drop off".

He's expecting a very competitive season, and is wary in particular of Calder United's potential. "They've been able to take the top half of two talented lists, so they will be very strong," he says.

McInnes also expects Birchip Watchem to challenge again,



Two down ... the Tigers are chasing NCFL hat-trick

along with Wedderburn, whom the Tigers meet in a round one clash at Donaldson Park. It will be a good early gauge of their 2025 prospects.



It's hard to know what to make of the recruiting of Oscar Brownless for the 2025 season.

His credentials are strong, having been drafted by Geelong to the AFL as a father-son following his time at the Geelong Falcons.

However, he has scarcely played since he was deleted by the Cats at the end of 2021, having failed to play a senior game.

His most notable move since then was his appearance on Celebrity Amazing Race Australia with his father Billy.

Anyone who watched the reality TV show would know that the younger Brownless is very fit, given he largely had to carry his old man — in some cases — through the various challenges they faced on the road.

He has played just four times over the past three seasons with South Adelaide in the SANFL and Geelong Amateurs, so his exposed form is sorely lacking.

But if the Tigers get the hard-running, highly skilled midfielder who joined Geelong in 2019, they will have chosen well.



Wade Donnan was clearly the best played in the North Central league last season, awarded 25

votes to win the Feeny Medal by five votes from Donald's Andrew Browne.

His victory was highly deserved, with Donnan having finished runner-up in the award twice before, and taking home the Keith Chalmers Trophy.

A hard-running and powerful midfielder, he gave the Tigers great drive from the middle of the ground in 2024.

And there's no reason to expect any drop off in form in the coming season.

Of the 19 games he played last year, including the winning grand final, Donnan was named among the best players 18 times. The only game in which he did not make the list was against wooden spooners Charlton.

Donnan has been with Sea Lake Nandaly since 2019 when he joined from Bendigo league club Strathfieldsaye.

Prior to that, he spent two sea-

sons in the Coates Talent League with the Bendigo Pioneers.

BACK STORY

Sea Lake Nandaly was formed as recently as 2003 from a merger with Berri Culgoa.

The new club was named the Sea Lake Nandaly Tigers, keeping the nickname of the teams whose identity had been lost in the amalgamation.

The Tigers joined the North Central League in 2016, and have had premiership success in 2019, as well as the dual wins in 2023 and 2024.

Ryan O'Sullivan won the club's first Feeny Medal in 2017 with the second-highest tally in league history of 33 votes.

Trent Donnan shared the medal in 2023, and Wade Donnan took out the award last season.

**The team at Nutrien Ag Solutions Berriwillock
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WEDDERBURN

Coach: Susie Lockhart Last season: Premiers
Best and fairest: Maddison Postle

New faces join dynasty club

WEDDERBURN is the juggernaut of the North Central netball scene.

Last season the Redbacks won their 30th A Grade premiership in 70 years, an unparalleled record of success in the region.

Premiership coach Emma Lockhart, who also played centre in the win, has given way to the vastly experienced Susie Lockhart, who is a legend of Wedderburn sporting scene, as well as Emma's second cousin.

Lockhart will be assisted by another second cousin Aliza Lockhart in coaching A Grade, and the two will swap roles with B Grade.

(You may sense a theme here - five Lockharts played in the 2024 A Grade premiership, and two played in the B Grade side which also took out the title.)

Emma is having a baby, as is teammate and former coach Meg Lockhart, but Susie is loath to

rule them out from playing this year. She said their experience would be missed but she was confident others would step up.

Aliza is expected to make her return from an ACL injury during the season, likely in June which marks 12 months since she went down.

The Redbacks have recruited well - again, keeping it in the family.

Kelsey Pallpratt, sister of Zach and Jake Pallpratt, joins from Sandhurst, where she played mid-court in the A Grade team.

And Paige Ryan, Zach Pallpratt's partner, has also made the move from the Bendigo league to Wedderburn.

"She's a little pocket rocket," the coach said.

Lockhart's deliberate policy is to enhance Wedderburn's reputation as a genuine and welcoming family club.



Wedderburn's coach Susie Lockhart



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LEGEND

Maddi Postle came back to the club last season after the birth of her third child, Clancey.

After two seasons out of the game, she duly took out best-on-court in her first match back, and at the end of the year was named the Redbacks' A Grade best-and-fairest for the fourth time.

Remarkably, it was the ninth time she has won or finished runner-up in the award. That tells you something about her talent and her propensity for hard work.

Lockhart has rewarded her with the A Grade captaincy for 2025.

Postle spent last pre-season dragging herself up Tower Hill to build her fitness for her netball duties. She brought along her husband, Adam, himself an enduring legend with the Wedderburn senior football team, and the three children.

The couple's commitment to the Redbacks' cause is undeniable - this season they are also acting as Auskick coordinators for the club.



Wedderburn's Maddi Postle

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WEDDERBURN

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Nickname: Redbacks Coach: Tom Metherell Least season: Third Premierships: 8
Best and fairest: Jackson McEwen Top goalkicker: Tom Campbell (48)

Midfielders grow Redbacks' desire

WEDDERBURN finished third in coach Tom Metherell's impressive debut season at the helm, but some key departures will test the Redbacks' resilience in 2025.

Star ruckman Jordan Hargreaves has departed for the Heathcote league, leaving a huge hole to fill.

Winner of the Feeny Medal for the league's best-and-fairest in 2021 and a member of the North Central team of the year last season, Hargreaves at only 29 is reaching the prime years of his career and will be sorely missed.

Taking on the first ruck role will be veteran Adam Postle, assisted by rugby union convert Mark Robinson, who is 193cm tall and strongly built, but very raw and still learning the nuances of the game.

Robinson's tap skills are excellent, but he will need to do more around the ground if he is to have a significant impact this season.

Wedderburn has also lost key forward Tom Campbell, who kicked 126 goals in the past three seasons, to Bendigo league's Sandhurst.

Both Campbell and Hargreaves were named in the league team of the year, illustrating the task ahead of the Redbacks to replace them.

To try to balance the ledger, the Redbacks have not gone for like-for-like in their recruiting, instead targeting tough and talented midfielders as well as some solid defenders.

Ben Bacon is a massive unit off half back, while Jye Mortlock is a two-time senior flag winner with Natte Bealiba in the Maryborough Castlemaine league who captained his team to the premier-

ship last year. The Redbacks are especially keen on the prospects of the Pallpratt brothers Jake and Zach, both of whom played in premierships last season in the Bendigo and Heathcote leagues.

Wedderburn also has welcomed back Dane Keuken, who finished second in the club's best-and-fairest award after playing just seven matches in 2023.



It's hard to single out one name from the many good signings for Wedderburn, but Mitch Jensen may go some of the way towards replacing Campbell's impact.

Jensen, who was senior coach at Diggers Rest last season after captaining the club's premierships side in 2023, played in a flag with Footscray in the VFL in 2014.

His resume is a solid one. Jensen started out as a small defender and played for many years with Doutta Stars in the strong Essendon District Football League, and appeared in 16 games with the Calder Cannons in what was then the TAC Cup in 2013, being named in the best players on seven occasions.

He also played with Wangaratta in the powerful Ovens & Murray league.

Jensen is versatile and hard at it, making him a tricky match up in the midfield and especially in the forward line, where he has proven to be an excellent goal kicker in recent seasons.

And, in a strange twist of fate,

he's reuniting with the Redbacks nickname, having played for Romsey in the Riddell District League.

BACK STORY

Wedderburn football club has been around since 1882, putting it behind only St Arnaud and Charlton in sporting longevity in the region.

The Redbacks joined North Central in 1950 after departing the Kerang league and won the flag the next season. It was another 17 years before they won another premierships.

The halcyon years for the club were from 2011-14, when Wedderburn won four successive titles, the league's longest streak of premierships.

The last of them, astonishingly, was won by a rushed behind in the final seconds of extra time after the Redbacks were tied with Charlton at full-time.

The netballers, though, are the champions of the club in terms of premierships, with last season's win being their 30th in 70 years of playing in the North Central region.

On the footy side, Alan Jackson holds the league record for goals in a season and in a match — 133 and 19 respectively in 1980.

At VFL/AFL level, honours go to Cresswell "Mickey" Crisp, who won two best-and-fairest awards at Carlton over 183 matches.

He played in the Blues' 1938 premierships team and captained Victoria, as well as coaching Fitzroy.



LEGEND
Danny Benaim in last year's final series

They don't come much more legendary than Danny Benaim, who at 40 years of age played his 350th senior game for the Redbacks last season.

The indestructible Benaim — whose nickname 'Jaw' tells you something about his chiselled appearance — has coached the team, played in five premierships, won a best-and-fairest award, represent-

ed North Central at regional level nine times and given life membership of the club.

Apart from a stint with St Mary's in the Northern Territory Football League, Benaim's entire career has been spent with Wedderburn — a rare feat even in country footy, where loyalty to your local club is treasured. Once a forward, now key in defence.

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BRIDGEWATER Coach: Caz Wood, Olivia Colliccoat Last season: Third Best and fairest: Carly Van Den Heuvel



Van Den Heuvel, Dupuy part of plan

BRIDGEWATER made it through to the preliminary final last season, losing to ultimate premiers Mitiamo after winning their first two finals against Bears Lagoon Serpentine and Newbridge.

It was a strong result for the Mean Machine, which had finished the home-and-away matches in fourth spot.

Mitiamo and Pyramid Hill were a class above the other teams in 2024, but Bridgewater defender Carly Van Den Heuvel marked her first season in the Loddon Valley league by winning the Helen Ward Medal for the competition's best-and-fairest player.

Co-coach Caz Wood is expecting a slow start to the season with a few players unavailable but says by round four Bridgewater's best side should have settled.

"If we can hold steady for only

one or two games I won't be worried about the overall season."

Wood plans to change the goal circle lineup with the acquisition of tall shooters.

A potential senior star is 17-and-under B&F Rachael Flood, who has been named in the elite Netball Victoria Talent Academy.

At just 15, and a towering 185cm, she made her A Grade debut last season despite still being eligible for the 15-and-under side.

Flood, who generally plays goal defence, won both the league and Bridgewater 17-and-under best-and-fairest awards and has been selected in the North Central region training squad for the 2025 state titles.

Bridgewater has some real junior talent coming through, with three representatives out of 10 in both the 13-and-under

and 17-and-under inter-league squads.



Carly Van Den Heuvel quickly stamped her mark on Loddon Valley netball in her first season after transferring from the Bendigo league.

She played in three premier-ships with Sandhurst before moving to Kangaroo Flat and immediately established her dominance over opposition forwards when she made her debut with Bridgewater.

Winning the league's top individual accolade, the Helen Ward

Medal, showed the instant impact of the tall defender's move, with votes in nine of the first 10 games of the season as a perfect illustration.

She was also named in the team of the year, along with Mean Machine co-coach Olivia Colliccoat.

Van Den Heuvel admitted she did not know what to expect in the new league after her switch from a stronger competition.

With a year under her belt with Bridgewater, expect another massive contribution from the bona fide star in 2025.



Gun goal shooter Lou Dupuy

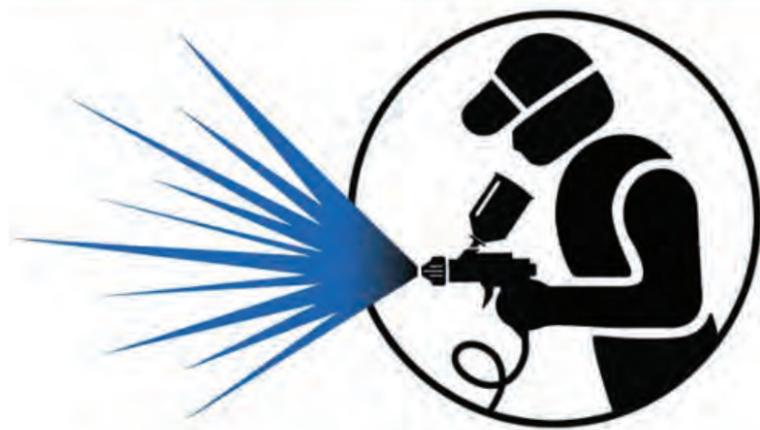
brings a new dimension to the Bridgewater attack, with her height offering a point of difference from the speedy goalers who have carried the load in recent years.

She is returning from an ACL injury and may take some time to get back in the swing of things, but the former Kangaroo Flat and Colbinabbin star is set to give the Mean Machine some real bite.

The versatile and powerful Dupuy can also play in defence if needed, and has coaching experience with Colbinabbin, so her leadership skills have already been recognised.

In one match with Kangaroo Flat in the Bendigo league in 2022, she scored 50 goals in the first three quarters to lead her side to a crushing win against Strathfieldsaye.

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BRIDGEWATER

Nickname: Mean Machine Coach: Lachlan Sharp Premierships: 22 Last season: Third
Best and fairest: Lachlan Sharp Top goalkicker: Lachlan Sharp (138)

Options get the Sharp focus

BRIDGEWATER made it to the Loddon Valley preliminary final last season but limped out of the premiers race with a big loss to Marong.

The team's talisman, full-forward and co-coach Lachlan Sharp, limped his way through the latter part of the season, too, struggling with leg injuries despite managing to kick 138 goals in his first season with the Mean Machine.

In 2025, he takes over the coaching role alone, and at the same time hopes he won't be alone in kicking winning scores.

Sharp, 34, is open in saying he's not focused on another race to the century with Bears Lagoon Serpentine's Josh Mellington, or anyone else.

His aim is to develop a multi-pronged attack that can stand up if he is struggling to kick goals himself.

Elsewhere on the ground, the Mean Machine has scored something of a coup with the signing of Luke Ellings from Kangaroo Flat in the Bendigo league.

He joins Bridgewater to play with his brother Jacob, who missed last season with an ACL injury.

Sharp has been impressed with the way the club's younger players have returned to training after the Christmas break.

He pointed to Darcy Wood, who won the club's 2023 senior B&F as "a real watch" and said

Harry McKinley was among the younger footballers who were the future of the club.

Another bonus is Xavier Walsh, who is coming off an injury-plagued 2024, and is like a new recruit, Sharp believes.

He said he wanted the Mean Machine to be a team that the community was proud of, and was looking forward to trying to bridge the gap to the top two teams, Marong and Pyramid Hill.

With Sharp, Bo Alexander, Jack Neylon and Joe Mayes all picked in last season's Loddon Valley team of the year, Bridgewater looks like a strong contender in 2025.



You can't go past the captain-coach, whose goal kicking exploits have graced the Bendigo and Loddon Valley leagues for more than a decade.

Sharp's ability at ground level is exceptional, and add that to strong marking and accurate kicking as you have the prototype star full-forward.

His leadership, too, is critical to the Mean Machine's fortunes.

Last season he was co-coach with former Hawthorn player Rick Ladson, and his impact on the



Harry McKinley (right) among Bridgewater's must-watch young brigade

field was clear to see, with Ladson coaching from the bench.

But Ladson also missed several games in the middle of the season after major knee surgery, giving Sharp a taste of solo coaching.

In 2025, with the role to himself, he will have more to worry about than his own form, but no one can doubt he will still be leading the scoring charts at club, and possibly league level.

Sharp has kicked an astonishing 1141 goals in 258 games — almost 1000 of them at Strathfieldsaye in the Bendigo league, where he won the competition best-and-fairest as well as the goal kicking award three times.

A medial ligament strain that impacted him late in the season has healed, promising big things for 2025.



Luke Ellings moves to Bridgewater from Kangaroo Flat, where he was a part of the Bendigo inter-league team last season.

He joins his older brother Jake,

who missed 2024 with an ACL injury. Luke is a strong inside midfielder with excellent ball use who played 16 games with Kangaroo Flat in 2024, and was named in the best players 14 times.

Footy is something of a family affair for Luke, who joined Kangaroo Flat to play under his father Michael, who was coach.

He was the Roos' highest vote-getter in the Michelsen Medal league best and fairest award.

Before that he played with Gisborne, winning the 2022 flag with the Bulldogs.

Ellings senior was sacked as coach after one season, freeing Luke to move elsewhere, and the Mean Machine felt like home with brother Jake returning after missing a year.

Luke is another player to have come through the elite under-18 system, having played with the Bendigo Pioneers.

Bridgewater football team has been winning premierships in the

incredible run of seven in a row from 2010-16.

The Mean Machine has the most premierships in the league — ahead of Newbridge with 16 — and the seven flags on the trot is also a Loddon Valley record.

Between 1908 and 1935 Bridgewater played in the Korong District league, winning four flags before returning to the Loddon Valley.

That seven-premiership stretch also included four Frank Harding medals for league best-and-fairest (Adam Parry twice, Andrew Collins and Zeb Broadbent) and four goal kicking awards (Brad Rohde twice, Alex Collins and Andrew Collins).

Josh Martyn and Lachlan Sharp have won league top goal kicker since then, with Sharp finishing joint runner up in the Harding Medal last season.

With such a long history of success, it's perhaps surprising that no player originating from Bridgewater has ever played at VFL/AFL level, although a number have graced the red and white after their careers in the big league.

BACK STORY

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ULTIMATE Quest '25

CALIVIL

north central football netball hockey
loddon valley football netball

Coach: Cindy Portwine Last season: Eighth
Best and fairest: Michelle Balic, Adele Barber, Georgia Mangan

Energetic and youthful enthusiasm

Lynchpin a mentor

THE hugely experienced Cindy Portwine takes over as A Grade coach for Calivil in 2024, hoping to bring the Demons back into contention after an eighth placed finish last season.

With only two wins and a porous defence that gave up the most goals in the league last year, she will provide a steady hand at the top.

Portwine brings a strong track record across a variety of leagues, beginning her career at Mt Pleasant before working her way up to A Grade netball at Kangaroo Flat in the Bendigo league and the Echuca Bombers.

She joins Calivil from Lockington Bamawm United, and with the end of her playing career approaching, Portwine's move into coaching is a logical one.

Three players shared the club best-and-fairest last season, with veteran Michelle Balic and youngsters Adele Barber and Georgia Mangan unable to be split.

It bodes well for the future to see young stars emerging and the more experienced netballers prepare to hand over the baton.

Ava Maxted, a rising star of the club after a brilliant junior career, will step up from 17-and-under netball to take a key role with A Grade.

She played a few games at the top level last season and will bring her midcourt skills to the A Grade team on a permanent basis in 2025.



Michelle Balic is one of those classic country sportspeople who can do a bit of everything very well.

She tied for the club best and fairest

award last season and then led Calivil North to premiership glory in the Loddon Valley tennis association over the summer, where she was considered as the competition's best player.

Balic played her 250th netball game for Calivil last season and has won a host of best and fairest awards in her time with the Demons.

She played in three B Grade league premierships in 2009, 2010 and 2015, and has spent recent seasons as a lynchpin of the senior A Grade side.

This season she will step down into A Reserve, declaring that at 40 it's time to move on from the A Grand ranks, despite her fine form last year.

While she may not appear in the top side any more, Balic will still be a significant presence around the club and a great mentor to the younger players.



Among a host of new players, Kelly McAllister has returned to the club after a few seasons off the court building a family. She will be the side's main shooter, bringing a wealth of experience to the A Grade team.

Her training form has been outstanding, by all reports, and she is ready to take on the key role of leading the scoring.

Even joining the squad is an achievement in itself, with Calivil having to turn away a number of players who presented to tryouts, which gives the Demons plenty of confidence for a successful season at A Grade.



Senior trio Michelle Balic, Georgia Mangan and Adele Barber (above) and stepping up to A Grade in 2025 will be Ava Maxted (left)

WE'RE WITH THE DEMONS IN SEASON 2025!



Q

uest '25

CALIVIL

north central football netball hockey
loddon valley football netball

Nickname: Demons Coach: Sam Maher Premierships: 14 Last season: Sixth
Best and fairest: Sam Maher Top goalkicker: Ben Baker (36)

Midfielders come with more strings to their bows

NEW COACH Sam Maher is confident that a much deeper list will make the Demons more competitive this season.

Last year it came down to Calivil United and Newbridge in the fight for fifth place on the ladder and the last spot in the finals.

With four teams so dominant in the league — Marong, Pyramid Hill, Bridgewater and Bears Lagoon Serpentine — there was a sense that fifth was something of a poisoned chalice.

But the fight to grab that spot went down to the second last match of the season.

Maher, who won the club best and fairest last season, said Newbridge deserved its finals place in 2024, but this year Calivil's strong recruiting gave him confidence his side was set to rise.

Focusing mainly on younger recruits, Calivil has picked up a host of versatile players — in the old days, they would have been known as utilities.

Most have midfield credentials but also have other strings to their bows.

Henry McCarthy joins from Heathcote and is seen as potentially the key recruit.

Josh Connolly is a midfielder from South Bendigo and Tallis Miles is a pacy half-back or winger from the Swifts in the Horsham league.

An interesting recruit is Jayden Leach, who has played in the past with Inglewood, but is better known for his cricketing exploits in the Upper Loddon Association, where he won player of the season as well as leading the bowl-

ing and batting averages and leading his team, Kingower, to the premiership.

Leach is seen as a pinch-hitting ruckman and key position player.

This season also sees the return of midfielder Josh Lawry, a former best-and-fairest who missed most of last year with a serious injury.

In Maher's first season as a coach he will have on-field help from Sam Green, and Calivil legend Ross Maxted will work the magnet board.



KEY COG
Sam Maher adds the coaching to his on-field exploits in 2025, confident he can blend the two responsibilities without affecting his football.

Last season he played 16 games, with 12 appearances in the best players, in his first year at the Demons, and was named in the Loddon Valley team of the year.

Previously he was at South Bendigo, although he turned out for Calivil juniors three times on permit in 2016 and 2017 while playing for South Bendigo's under-18 side.

Maher played representative junior football with the Bendigo league, and also played briefly with Bears Lagoon Serpentine in the Loddon Valley competition.

He takes over the coaching from Anthony Dennis.



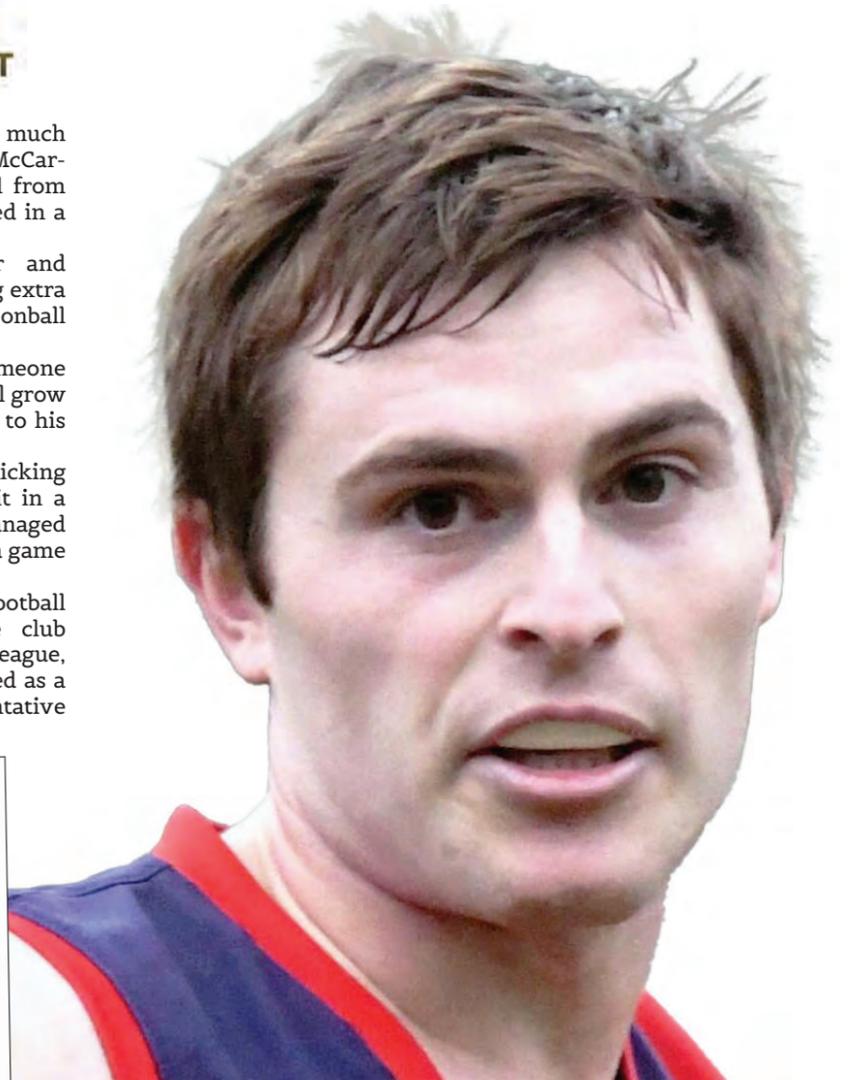
STAR RECRUIT
Still in his early 20s, much is expected of Henry McCarthy, who moves to Calivil from Heathcote, where he played in a grand final two years ago.

A powerful midfielder and fierce tackler, he will bring extra hardness to the Demons' onball brigade in 2024.

McCarthy is seen as someone whose leadership skills will grow with time as he settles in to his new environment.

He also has a knack for kicking goals, a highly prized trait in a midfield player, having managed to go at better than a goal a game over his career.

McCarthy began his football career with powerhouse club Sandhurst in the Bendigo league, and as a junior was selected as a Bendigo league representative against other regions.



Henry McCarthy (left) and new coach Sam Maher

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Quest '25

INGLEWOOD

north central football netball hockey
loddon valley football netball

Coach: To be announced Last season: Ninth
Best and fairest: Abbey Hayes



Inglewood's 13 and under finals side in 2024

Growing youth programs

INGLEWOOD is expected to again have a full list of netball sides in the Loddon Valley competitions.

Last season was a difficult one for the Woodies in the senior grades.

A Grade and B Grade both finished at the bottom of their respective ladders, with a solitary win to the B Grade side all that the two sides could muster.

There was some success at junior level with the 13-and-under team finishing an impressive third, offering hope for the future if the young players can stick together and continue to develop in the years to come.

The netball side of things for the club is in a state of turmoil as we go to press.

Abbey Hayes, who coached last season, pulled out of the role a little more than a week before the beginning of the season.

She had been re-appointed as Inglewood coach for 2025, and while she won't now hold that position it is believed she will continue as a player.

Her continued presence is critical for the club, as she was a clear winner of the best-and-fairest award last season.

As well as losing Hayes as coach, the club lost its netball operations manager, which is clearly not an ideal situation so close to the start of competition.

However, perhaps Bears Lagoon Serpentine provides Inglewood with a template for recovery, making the finals last

season after a winless 2023. Georgia Harrison was a shining light in 2024, finishing second in the best-and-fairest award in her first season with the Blues. She has returned for the coming season and played impressively in practice matches.

In an encouraging sign for the club, the A Grade team had a win over Lancaster, which plays in the Kyabram league, in a pre-season game.

The coach, a mid-court star, is clearly the Blues' best player and was expected to lead by example as playing coach again in 2025.

Hayes is the hub around which all of Inglewood's A Grade team revolves, but her relinquishing of the coaching position puts

something of a question mark about how she will approach the season, and indeed if she will play.

Hayes steeled the field in the club B&F last season, her second in two years with Inglewood, which indicated her quality.

She took on the A Grade coaching after a season as captain in 2023, increasingly taking on a leadership role as that year went on.

Georgia Harrison is also an important player for the A Grade team as a shooter and will need to step up further in 2025 if the Woodies are to climb the ladder.

The club's community spirit is helping in the rejuvenation of local netball and the club.

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ULTIMATE Quest '25

INGLEWOOD

Nickname: Blues/Woodies Coach: Fergus Payne Premierships: 9 Last season: Seventh Best and fairest: Mitch Conlan Top goalkicker: Mitch Conlan (19)

Woodies stock up

THERE is genuine optimism that the Blues can improve this year after a strong pre-season.

Inglewood, after breaking a 20-year finals drought in 2023, missed the end-of-season action last year in Fergus Payne's first season as playing coach.

Plenty of numbers at training, natural improvement from some of the younger players, and a decent recruiting effort have Woodies fans up and about.

A former club best and fairest winner Bregon Cotchett has returned to Inglewood after a season at West Preston-Lakeside, boosting the midfield stocks.

Kai Cavalaro has joined from Heathcote, and offers versatility as a key position or general forward.

Mid-forward Tom Guerra from Leitchfield-Gunbower played in the Heathcote league grand final last season, having appeared for Calivil in 2019.

Powerful midfielder Harry Veitch comes from the strong VAFA competition where he played with Old Camberwell, having also played in the Eastern Football Netball League with Mitcham and Balwyn.

Another recruit is key forward Ben Napier, who hails originally from Kyabram.

He has missed a few seasons with a serious knee injury, but Inglewood is hopeful he can recapture the talent he showed as a junior.

But most of all, Inglewood has arguably the best young footballer in the league ready to start to dominate.

Having bulked up considerably over summer, and ripping it up at training, he looks primed to emerge as a star of the competition.

Payne is bullish about promising midfielder-forward Liam Marciano, who played 10 games with the Woodies last season and was named in the best players on eight occasions.

Payne said Marciano had not missed a training session over the summer after an injury-plagued 2024.



It may be unfair to place so much expectation on a player just out of junior ranks, but Gabe Nevins is a gun.

His record speaks for itself, winning the Loddon Valley's rising star nod in 2024 after a season in which he was hit with injury and also bore the brunt of some tough opposition treatment.

Nevins missed 10 matches after suffering a serious leg injury in round three, and three matches after his return he was concussed and missed another two rounds in a clash that saw Newbridge coach Sam Gale suspended for two weeks.

Speedy, and blessed with great skill, Nevins is a threat off the wing, in the midfield, on the forward line, and even as a running half-back.

There is no question over his fitness and resilience.

In 2023 he played 14 matches in the under-18 competition and backed that up with 15 games in the seniors. Nevins made his sen-



Gabe Nevins ... one of the league's exciting young players

ior debut the previous year, playing 12 games with the big boys on top of his 15 junior matches.

Nevins seems destined for bigger things, but for the moment Loddon Valley fans can enjoy a young talent on the rise.



Bregon Cotchett's second coming at Inglewood is a major boost for the club, on and off the field.

He won the 2023 best-and-fairest award before departing to play with his brother, who was retiring at the end of 2024, in Melbourne's highly competitive Northern league.

Cotchett's form in 2023 helped the Woodies to fourth place on

the ladder, and his absence was felt strongly last season. hard-at-it and powerful midfielder, he also has a keen eye for the goals, kicking 33 goals in 31 matches for Inglewood in 2022-23.

Cotchett is regarded highly off the field as well, with Payne saying he had been loved at the club in his previous stint with Inglewood.

Having played with Payne in 2023 only makes Cotchett's transition an easier one.

BACK STORY

"Inglewood Cricket and Football Club" gets its first mention in the archives in 1873, when it was recorded as playing social matches.

Inglewood, wearing blue and red, was a foundation member of

the Victorian Football Association in 1877, along with Carlton, Geelong, Melbourne and St Kilda, plus other country teams including Ballarat, Castlemaine and Rochester.

The club played league hopscotch in succeeding decades – Loddon Valley, Korong District, Inglewood Football Association, Korong Central and back to the Loddon Valley again.

From 1951-58 Inglewood played off in seven grand finals, winning five.

The club also won the first two seasons of the Loddon Valley Netball league in 1951-52. Football flags followed in 1971 and 1986, while netballers had success in 1977, 1981 and 1994.

The most notable sportsman associated with the Blues was the first Brownlow medalist, 'Carji' Greeves, who was named as coach in 1935.

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NEWBRIDGE

Nickname: Maroons Coach: Matt McArthur Premierships: 9 Last season: Fifth
Best and fairest: Tyler McLeod Top goalkicker: Chris Dixon (38)

Matt wants to stay top 5

CAN Newbridge keep rising in 2025 after a valiant late-season thrust saw the Maroons make a genuine fist of the elimination final last year that was interrupted by storm and peppered with hail?

With four clear standout teams always destined for the finals, the Maroons rose up the ladder to finish fifth in an encouraging result.

Newbridge and Calivil were the two clubs that duked it out for the last final's spot and the Maroons won the race before tumbling to a predictable heavy defeat in the elimination final.

In a league with virtually a first and second division, Newbridge will be looking to hold onto their status and their top-five position.

Matt McArthur has taken over as coach, replacing the duo of Sam Gale and Daniel Smith. Gale will play again this season. McArthur has midfielder Tyler Constable as his key assistant coach.

Constable had an outstanding debut season with the Maroons after switching from Ballarat, polling 10 votes in the Frank Harding Medal.

Tyler McLeod was rewarded for his excellent year with the club best-and-fairest and selection in the Loddon Valley team of the season, but he is playing in the Geelong league this season.

Key forward Brandon Dimech joined the Maroons mid-season and proved a revelation working up the ground and providing a fine marking target.

His arrival helped propel Newbridge to that unlikely finals spot, working as a perfect foil for veteran stay-at-home full-forward Chris Dixon, who used his strong frame to take contested marks close to goal.

McArthur said he was working on recruiting a full forward from Melbourne who would allow Dix-



Matt McArthur ... wants to stay in top five

McArthur will be relying on him to kick and create goals and be a general on the forward line.



Andrew Willett was a much sought-after football commodity after transferring from Mildura to Bendigo for work.

The tough midfielder is a police officer, like a number of his new teammates — Brandon Dimech included — and had a number of clubs clamouring for his services but chose to join the Maroons.

He played for Gol Gol last season, appearing in 14 matches and making the best players' list nine times. Willett also sneaked forward for 10 goals.

He has experience in the Essendon District league in Melbourne, which is a hard proving ground.

McArthur was highly impressed with what he saw in Newbridge's final practice match, and said Willett was training well.

"We have high hopes for him."

BACK STORY

Founded in 1904 and joining the Loddon Valley league immediately, Newbridge is second only to Bridgewater in premierships, with 16 cups on the trophy shelf.

And talk about impact. The Maroons won six flags in a row from 1905-1910, and then another in 1912. They then took a break from collecting premierships until 1929, following up in 1930, 1933 and 1937 followed by 1957, 1978, 1993, 2000 and 2018.

on to achieve his "dream of playing reserves".

The coach is hoping that the new arrival would enable him to set himself up for the season in a key defensive role.

He said he was "learning on the job" as playing coach but had a mentor from his previous club Powelltown in the Outer East Football League who had told him "trust in your bench" and rely on them to carry out his instructions.



Brandon Dimech changed the team's structure when he joined Newbridge in the middle of last season from Romsey.

In coach Matt McArthur's words, "he straightened us up"

with his presence at centre half-forward and strong hands.

Dimech's leadership has been acknowledged with his appointment as one of the Maroons' vice-captains this season.

In five of the six games he played after first appearing in round 12 he was named among the best players.

The best of them was a five-goal effort against Mitiamo in the final round of the home-and-way season.

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NEWS

ULTIMATE Quest '25

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NEWBRIDGE

Coach: Kristy Gandy and Selina Holland Last season: Fifth Best and fairest: Hayley Martiniello

Abbi will return to where it all started

NEWBRIDGE will be looking to build on last season that had promise, joy and some disappointments.

The disappointment came in the finals for the A Grade Maroons, who went into the deciders in third place but tumbled out with losses to Pyramid Hill and Bridgewater.

You could have thrown a blanket over Newbridge, Bridgewater and Bears Lagoon Serpentine, with all three finishing the home-and-away season with 10 wins.

The Maroons made it to third on the basis of a draw, but despite a strong squad which included two members of the Loddon Valley team of the year in Megan Jennings and Hayley Martiniello

they couldn't break through in the finals.

With Jennings having left the club, best-and-fairest Martiniello has been named captain for 2025, a nod to her importance to Newbridge.

Coaches Kristy Gandy and Selina Holland said they were excited to see what the team could do this season, especially with the addition of young goal attack Abbi Wells from Golden Square, who has starred at junior levels and will slot straight into the A Grade side.

Her introduction to the club would see last season's GA in Jorja Hufer move to goal keeper, and Gandy said Hufer was already beginning to own her new position.

Leah Oxford will return to A Grade after playing A Reserve or B Grade last year as she eased herself back into netball after starting a family.

"She shows amazing leadership, and is so cool, calm and collected. She guides players around the court," Gandy said.



Abbi Wells, who played her junior netball with Newbridge before joining Golden Square in the Bendigo league, shapes a genuine star of the competition.

Wells, who has just turned 18,

was invited to try out for the Bendigo Strikers in the Victorian Netball League, but turned it down to return to her roots with the Maroons.

A true country girl, she is the daughter of club legend Danielle Wells, and the two managed to play together in Danielle's 300th game and Abbi's 100th game for Newbridge before the Bendigo move.

She will play as goal attack for the A grade team.

Gandy said: "She has something you can't teach, she is just so naturally gifted and has such a level head."

Returning star Leah Oxford will move to goal defence with Wells' arrival.



Hayley Martiniello's rise to the A Grade captaincy is no surprise given her performances for the club and the leadership traits she has always exhibited.

Co-coach Kristy Gandy said of the star mid-courter: "Her agility is unmatched. She's got speed and she's so precise when she comes in for any kind of intercept. The ball goes that fast, and we (the coaches) say to each other, 'How did she do that?'"

Martiniello joined Newbridge from Benalla last season.

BL SERPENTINE

Coach: Danielle O'Toole Last season: Fifth Best and fairest: Ava Francis

At just 17 years of age, goal shooter Ava Francis had a breakout season as Bears Lagoon Serpentine returned to the A Grade finals for the first time in 18 years, winning 10 matches.

They were narrowly beaten 36-32 by Bridgewater in the elimination final played at Pyramid Hill.

In her first senior year, Francis won her club's best-and-fairest award and the league's rising star award, as well as remarkably finishing runner up in the league's B&F, the Helen Ward Medal.

Serp's rise up the ladder was due in large part to Francis' emergence as an elite player whose deadly accurate shooting and sure hands will be a key to the Bears' fortunes in 2025.

Danielle O'Toole will play again and has been re-appointed to coach A Grade in recognition of the team's stellar 2024 season. She finished runner-up to Francis in the club award last year.

Dual-position star Lara Clements has resigned, along with veterans Ellen McRae and Meg Powell.

Casey Zass, second in the Bears' 2023 B&F count, returns after a season lost to a shoulder reconstruction.



Casey Zass: Renowned for her athleticism in defence, young star Zass is a key signing for the Bears after sitting out last season with injury. She battled through the 2023 season with shoulder issues that required a full reconstruction at the end of the year. The injury didn't stop her from being voted as runner-up in the club's best-and-fairest award, a measure of her courage and resilience.



Ava Francis' sensational debut season in 2024 was one for the ages and goes well for a spectacular future in netball. Her scoring exploits helped to drag Bears Lagoon Serpentine into the finals after a winless season in 2023. Francis blends strength and power with great finesse, and her goal shooting is exemplary.

MAIDEN GULLY

Coach: Leisa Barry Last season: Seventh Best and fairest: Emily Barbour

MAIDEN Gully finished last A Grade season in seventh place, missing the finals after a 5-11 season.

It was a disappointment after a dominant 2023, when the Eagles lost only one match on the way to a narrow grand final win over Mitiamo.

Club stalwart Leisa Barry has been named as the coach for 2025, having played more than 230 games for Maiden Gully and been a premierships winner in a number of grades.

She was initially named as interim coach as Maiden Gully looked around for a permanent appointment, but has now been confirmed in the role.

Barry also has vast experience as a coach at junior level with the Eagles.

She says if the A Grade team can reach the finals it would be a great achievement.

Barry says it will be a very young team, basically a 23-and-under side, with three teenagers set to be starters.

Maiden Gully lost five players from the 2023 premierships team before last season, and struggled last year as a result, although Barry said the ladder didn't really reflect the team's efforts last year.

"It was a real rebuilding season," she

said. "We haven't picked up well-known players, but have promoted from within."

Barry says she will play only if needed, but if she does she will share the court with her daughter Paige, who is a rising star for the club.



Courtney Matthews stepped up to A Grade last season after winning a premierships in C Grade with Maiden Gully in 2023.

She managed the step up in class with aplomb, becoming the team's main goal shooter.

According to coach Leisa Barry, Matthews improved with every game last season and continued to ask questions of opposition defences.

Tall and powerful, she shoots with deadly accuracy, and with natural improvement is expected to be a major influence in years to come. Matthews, who previously played with Bears Lagoon Serpentine, also brings welcome experience to a youthful team.

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ULTIMATE Quest '25

PYRAMID HILL Coach: Chelsea Emmerson Last season: Second Best and Fairest: Jessica Holdstock

A journey still to travel

THE Bulldogs have revenge on their minds after losing the A Grade grand final to Mitiamo last season.

Chelsea Emmerson stays on as a coach with unfinished business, admitting that her competitive nature brought her back for another crack at the premiership.

Pyramid Hill has lost one young champion in Imogen Broad, the coach's niece, who won the league's rising star award in 2023 and had an important role in mentoring the club's younger players.

She has moved to Macorna in the Golden Rivers league for personal reasons.

However, Emmerson is confident the recruiting of mid-court Morgan Dingwall from Rochester will prove to be a like-for-like replacement for Broad.

Former Bulldogs junior Danica McCahon has returned after taking a few years off to have a family.

Pyramid Hill has played pre-season matches against Huntly, Boort and White Hills, giving Emmerson a chance to see how her new line-up is shaping up.

She is confident the Bulldogs will be in the A Grade premiership mix again in 2025, naming title holders Mitiamo and Maiden Gully as the main potential threats.

"The two players we have brought in add more experience, and Morgan was involved in our last premiership in A Grade," Emmerson said.

Jessica Holdstock took out the

club best-and-fairest last season, and polled 15 votes in the league's Helen Ward Medal, two votes ahead of Pyramid Hill stalwart Abbey Dingwall, a former A Grade coach.

Nothing is guaranteed in sport, but for Pyramid Hill the future looks bright, with all four senior teams making grand or preliminary finals last season.



Last year's club best-and-fairest winner Jessica Holdstock is a Pyramid Hill stalwart, juggling her netball with a career as a nurse and being mother to four children.

She made her debut in A Grade as a junior in 2001 and was a regular member of the top senior side a year later, aged 16.

Her longevity is a wonder, and Holdstock was the Bulldogs top vote winner in the Helen Ward Medal last season.

She was pivotal in Pyramid Hill grabbing the early lead in last year's grand final against Mitiamo, with 11 goals in the first quarter.

Along with Abbey Dingwall, Holdstock was named in the league's team of the season and chosen as vice-captain to Mitiamo legend Laura Hicks.

Her contribution to the Bulldogs also included coaching an A Grade premiership – one of three she has played in – and five club best player awards.



Unfinished business ... Chelsea Emmerson

There's no reason to imagine there will be any drop off in 2025 for this star of the competition.



With two A Grade premierships with Pyramid Hill under her belt, Morgan Dingwall's return to the

Bulldogs' kennel is more than timely.

Last season's runners up have lost key mid-court player Imogen Broad for the year, but in Dingwall have secured an experienced replacement who can play as a shooter as well.

She has represented the Goulburn Valley senior regional side in the state championships while playing with Rochester.

Way back in 2014, she was named best on court in Pyramid Hill's 17-and-under premiership win.

And even before that, she was representing the Loddon Valley select side in regional competitions at 15-and-under level.

The legend and the star recruit will add depth and power to a Bulldogs outfit that impressed in 2024.

MITIAMO

Coach: Abbey Battersby Last season: Premiers Best and fairest: Laura Hicks

ABBEY Battersby is the Superoos' new A Grade coach, taking over from Jen Wilson who called time after leading Mitiamo to the premiership last season.

The team had to do it the hard way, losing its first finals match and having to come through the preliminary final to face Pyramid Hill, a side which seemed to have Miti's measure after defeating the Superoos twice during the season.

But they turned the table in the final, leading Wilson to leave on a high.

Battersby has been a key part of the Mitiamo defence since 2021 and was a member of the shield-winning team in 2024.

She said taking over the coaching from Wilson was "very daunting" but she had received great support from her teammates in her new role.

"Half the time they coach each other out on the court."

"We've had a lot of focus on fitness and running out four quarters in pre-season," Battersby said.

With the entire winning squad from last season re-signing, developing individual skills had been part of the pre-season regime.

Goalie Laura Hicks is fronting up again, having won the club best-and-fairest last

season and finished third in voting for the league's Helen Ward Medal – which she has won four times.

She was named in the team of the season along with defender Amelia Ludeman.

The club decided, with its mantra of playing home-grown talent, to not anyone to the A Grade squad this season, content that all of the premiership players have returned and are keen to play again.

Rising star is young wing attack Alicia Hay, who former coach Jen Wilson said had "owned" the position after taking over when Kelly Pay was injured.

"She's a talented junior who really stepped up," Wilson said, to the point where the experienced Pay changed positions when she returned from injury.



When she chooses eventually to retire, Laura Hicks will stand as a Loddon Valley netball great. In fact, she is one already.

Four league best-and-fairest awards, premiership captain, and 2024 league Team of the Season captain are among the accolades she has received.

MARONG

Coach: Bridget Willox Last season: Sixth Best and fairest: Bridget Willox

MARONG netballers had a successful season in 2024, winning five premierships in B Grade, C Grade, C Reserve, 17-and-under and 13-and-under, illustrating the depth of talent in Panther netball ranks.

The clear absence, however, is an A Grade trophy, with the team finishing a disappointing sixth on the ladder and missing the finals.

Bridget Willox, last season's best and fairest winner (as was husband Matt for the senior footballers) has taken over as playing coach, with the aim of making the powerhouse club a force to be reckoned with again at A Grade level.

The Panthers have picked up Emmerson Doyle from North Central club Boort, and also recruited the highly rated and vastly experienced Asela Finch from Macorna in the Golden Rivers league.



New coach Bridget Willox took out the best and fairest award last season and will lead the Panthers in 2025 in her first senior coaching role.

She began playing netball in 2003 with Tyntynder, and represented the Central Murray league at the state championships from 2005-2009.

Her coaching credentials were proven in 2008 and 2011 when she coached junior teams to premierships.

She spent 2013 at Eaglehawk and the following year played for Charlton, then spent four seasons in Melbourne competitions. Willox joined the Panthers in 2022, with her husband Matt.

She was a key player in the A Grade team that reached the finals that year, and took the next year off while having her second child. A strong shooter, Willox will take on a team determined to rise up the ladder in 2025.



Experienced Asela Finch joins Marong after one season with Macorna, with the remarkable record of having been best and fairest or runner-up for her club for the past seven years. Finch has been a dominant goaler over her career.

Q

uest '25

north central football netball hockey
loddon valley football netball

PYRAMID HILL

Nickname: Bulldogs Coach: Nathan Fitzpatrick Premierships: 0 Last season: Second Best and fairest: Tom McGregor Top goalkicker: Zach Alford (63)

Primed for new crack at flag



Zach Alford ... a key cog in another Bulldog flag tilt

HOPES that one of the longest droughts in country football might end were dashed when Pyramid Hill fell to Marong in last season's grand final.

Having beaten the Panthers twice during the year, including in the second semi-final, the Bulldogs went into the decider full of confidence, but a sometimes ill-disciplined performance and Marong's greater composure under pressure meant the drought-breaker was not to be.

Pyramid Hill, whose last flag was in 1950, has lost the league's premier defender in Tom McGregor and star midfielder Damon Hemphill, but a recruiting spree has the Bulldogs primed for another crack at the title.

Coach Nathan Fitzpatrick has focused on the forward line, and giving a chop out to Zach Alford, who has carried the attacking load in recent seasons.

The most intriguing recruit is Kai Daniels, brother of NBA star Dyson Daniels, who will play when not required for Richmond's VFL side.

Extremely athletic and with good skills, he will feature in the ruck and up forward.

Fitzpatrick, who coached Daniels at under-18 level, did some impressive cloak-and-dagger work to lure the 24-year-old from a reluctant Golden Square.

Ben Bisset from Mount Pleasant will add power to the forward line, coming off 41 goals and

being named in the Heathcote league team of the year.

Daniel Frame, another from Mount Pleasant, shapes as the McGregor replacement in defence, while brothers Mitch and Jasper Cheeseman will boost the forward stocks, along with Mitch Langan from Noosa.

The key signing of all may be Ryan Semmel, a serial best-and-fairest winner in country Victorian leagues, with a resume that includes representing Australia in an Amateur Football Council tour of South Africa.

Ben Knight, who finished second in the league's Harding Medal last season, is back with the Bulldogs.



Ryan Semmel arrives at Pyramid Hill with vast experience and a track record that stacks up with the best players in country Victoria.

He is a three-time winner of the Cheatley Medal for the best-and-fairest player in the Heathcote league when playing for Huntly and has also won B&F awards at Stanhope in the Kyabram league.

In 2014, Semmel was a contestant in the reality TV show, The Recruit, which pitted a range of local footballers against each

other in hopes of winning an AFL contract.

He didn't win, but was ranked by bookies as equal third favourite as the show neared its finale.

Semmel has played for 11 different clubs over the years, including two last season — the East Brighton Vampires and Cohuna in the Central Murray league.

A stint with the Tiwi Bombers in the Northern Territory, where he played nine games and was named in the best players seven times, is among his highlights.



Zach Alford has carried the Bulldogs' forward line in his two seasons with the club.

Last year he kicked 63 goals as Pyramid Hill made the grand final, kicking at least one goal in all 19 matches including one haul of six and scoring five goals on five occasions.

However, Alford blotted his copybook in the decider, getting sent off in the second quarter for striking ruck man Michael Bradbury.

Marong took a winning lead in the time they were a man down, and Alford accepted a two-week ban for an early guilty plea which will keep him out of the side for the first fortnight of the season.

Clearly, he will want to redeem himself in 2025, and with a new role mixing his forward time with duties as a big-bodied midfielder, Alford is primed to make a big contribution to Pyramid Hill's bid for that long-awaited premiership win.

BACK STORY

Pyramid Hill FC was established in 1890, and in its first ever scratch match the following year, defeated Macorna, 0.3 to 0.0.

The club has changed nicknames, colours and leagues

frequently, turning out in the Pyramid Hill District, Mitiamo District, East Loddon, Tandarra-Macorna Line, Northern District, Northern and Echuca, and finally Loddon Valley leagues.

Twice, and for only a season each time, the club split into two teams, Pyramid Hill Rovers and Pyramid Hill Ramblers.

The club's colours have ranged from blue and gold, through light and dark blue, black and white, and red, white and black, to the current red, white and blue, and the Tricolours have become the Bulldogs.

Pyramid Hill has won six flags in its history, the most recent in 1950 when the team defeated Mitiamo by six points.

In 1995 the Bulldogs joined the Loddon Valley league and have failed to salute in the seniors, although they have won numerous reserves titles.

They have twice won the league best and fairest award, with Billy Micevski in 2022 and Dylan Colis the following season, and took out the goal kicking prize in 2019 through Braidy Dickens.

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MARONG

Nickname: Panthers Coach: Kain Robins and Paul Thomson Premierships: Four
Last season: Premiers Best and fairest: Matt Willox Top goalkicker: Kain Robins (58)

It's change and same

AFTER three premierships on the trot, does Marong still have the burning desire to give 100 per cent in search of a fourth flag in succession?

That's the big question facing the Panthers in 2025.

With triple premiership coach Linton Jacobs departing for the Heathcote District league and his old side Colbinabbin, there has been significant change at the top for Marong.

Veteran forward Kain Robins will play on after being named in the league team of the year last season, and will share coaching duties with Paul Thomson, who will coach from the bench.

Thomson steps up from coaching the under-18 team which was runner-up to the East Loddon Rams in 2024.

Robins said the transition to a coaching role, while accepting there will big shoes to step into, had been made easier with Thomson carrying the off-field load.

He said before taking on the job he spoke to the players to convince himself they were "motivated and invested again".

At 40, he expected this season to be his last as a player, but winning the club goal kicking and making the league team of the year in 2024 proved there was still a lot of footballing life left.

Dual premiership player Patrick Gretgrix has returned to the Panthers after a season with Har-



court. He won premierships in 2022 and 2023 and took out the club's prestigious Michael Herrick Memorial Award in the latter.

Nathan Walsh also played in those two flags and is back after a year off from footy studying for a master's degree.

Key players from last year have re-signed, including the speedy Jimmy Gadsden, who took out the best-afield honours in the premiership win over Pyramid Hill.

B&F winner Matt Willox is also back, with his wife Bridget taking over A Grade netball coaching duties.

The depth of Marong's talent is clear, with all three football teams making the grand final last season.

While only the seniors were successful, the reserves and under-18s were dominant through-

out the home and away season, offering strong hope for the future.



Shannon Geary arrives at Marong after a long and successful career with Strathfieldsaye in the Bendigo league. More than 250 games, three-time premiership captain, seven grand finals for four wins, co-coaching and assistant coaching roles as well as inter-league selection are all part of the package he brings to the Panthers.

Geary played with Bendigo Pioneers in the elite under-18 competition and also turned out for the Bendigo Bombers when Es-

sendon had its VFL links with the regional city.

He also appeared for Kangaroo Flat, Sandhurst and Eaglehawk in a career spent almost entirely in the BFNL.



Last season Geary played 13 senior matches with the Storm and was named in the best players five times.

He will provide Marong with football nous, a hard-at-it combative style and great on-field leadership alongside Kain Robins in 2025.

Last season's premiership captain Nathan Devanny sealed a great 2024 by being named in the LVFNL team of the year.

He is one of many players to have appeared in the hat-trick of flags, and also won a Michael Herrick Memorial Award.

Devanny took over the captaincy last from premiership winner and former Harding medallist Corey Gregg.

Importantly, he is a goal-scoring midfielder, with 71 goals to his credit during the three-peat.

That feature of his game adds to an extremely potent forward line headed by Kain Robins, with three Panthers in the top six of the league goal kickers last sea-

son. Devanny is also good in the air, making him an elite package.

As well, his lauded leadership abilities will be a tremendous assistance to Robins and Paul Thomson in their first season as co-coaches.

BACK STORY

Marong joined the Loddon Valley competition in 1983, and won its first senior football premiership in 1989.

Then followed some lean years until the Linton Jacobs-led Panthers went on a winning streak that returned three flags in the past three seasons.

With only two losses in three seasons, Marong set a league record for successive winning matches of 42. Both of those losses were recorded last season against Pyramid Hill, but the Panthers got their revenge in the senior grand final.

In recent years, Marong made attempts leave the Loddon Valley league but, for now, has remained in the league.

Loddon Valley officials concede that the club, with its proximity to Bendigo and ability to attract players in both football and netball, may have outgrown the league, and the expectation is that Marong will eventually depart.

New coach will be key and cog in lifting fortunes of Superroos

IT WAS either feast or famine for the Superroos in 2024.

While the senior men struggled through a winless season, the A Grade netballers swept their way to a premiership.

The only way is up for the Mitiamo senior footballers, with last season's best and fairest Luke Lougoon taking over the coaching responsibilities.

The strength of his performances in 2024 is highlighted by him being named in the league team of the year, and polling strongly in the Frank Harding Medal.

He takes on his first coaching job hoping for an early win that would give his young squad a burst of confidence.

"Obviously a win early on would let the group see the reward for the hard work they've been doing in the pre-season," Lougoon said.

The players have been on a track since mid-November, and had a strong practice match performance against good opposition in Maldon, edging the Maryborough Castlemaine league club in a five-quarter hit out.

Lougoon said building depth

MITIAMO

Nickname: Superroos Coach: Luke Lougoon Premierships: Six
Best and fairest: Luke Lougoon Top goalkicker: Liam Shiell (12)

was critical to success in the league, and the Superroos had kept that in mind while recruiting for this season.

Most of the new players had shown a bit in the pre-season, he said, and had worked in well with those returning from last season.

"I have been pleasantly surprised at how they have gelled."

Some of the new faces are Anthony Huisman from Stanhope in the Kyabram league, Kerang pair Jack Dalglish and Cody Tuohy, Jarrod Saliba from Tarneit, Dylan Marshman from Southern Mallee Thunder, and Lachie Carter, who has spent the past couple of years in Queensland, not playing football.

Last season's B&F runner up Zach Morrison has re-signed for 2024, along with another key player in Liam Shiell.

With a bye in round one, Mitiamo will have to wait a little longer to see if Lougoon's optimism is well founded.



Incoming coach Luke Lougoon admits his new role will make this season "a bit of a juggling act, and it will be a steep learning curve for me".

What is certain is that Lougoon will lead from the front, having clearly been the Superroos best player in recent years in a career that now totals 10 seasons with Miti.

His record with Mitiamo is impeccable, having played 139 games and been named in the best players in about two-thirds of those.

In the past two seasons, he has failed to be among the best just twice.

A premiership player with the club in 2019, he has experienced

the highs and lows of football, and now has to guide a new group of players back to success.

Last season he was named on the half-back flank and chosen as vice-captain of the Loddon Valley team of the year, a remarkable achievement in a winless season for his club.



Among a host of new names, Anthony Huisman from Stanhope has been the pre-season standout.

His pace playing off the wing has been impressive and he will have plenty of opportunity to gain midfield time in 2025.

Huisman's versatility is a boost to the Superroos' ranks, giving Lougoon options on where to play him.

He is regarded as an excellent hard tackler, with defensive efforts hugely important in a young playing group.

Coming off three impressive seasons in the Kyabram league, Huisman looks set to play a key role with Mitiamo.

"He has plenty of positives," Lougoon says simply.

BACK STORY

Mitiamo Football Club has been around since the 1890s, and joined the Loddon Valley competition in 1956. The club's first flag came in 1967, and premierships have been well spread out during the Superroos existence.

Premierships were also won in 1977, 1979, 1999, 2009, and most recently 2019.

The Superroos have also produced seven league bests.

ULTIMATE Quest '25

north central football netball hockey
loddon valley football netball

BL SERPENTINE
Nickname: Bears Coach: Jake Wilkinson Premierships: 12 Last season: Fourth Best and fairest: Justin Laird Top goalkicker: Josh Mellington (93)

Laird in centre to Mellington: Dream Bears



Josh Mellington steps into assistant's role at Serpentine in 2025. The star forward missed the back half of last season with injury

WHEN boom recruit Josh Mellington's hamstring blew out nine matches into last season, so too did the Bears' premiership hopes. The former Fremantle AFL forward had kicked 93 goals in those nine games, and while Bears Lagoon Serpentine subsequently found more avenues to goal, the absence of the star goal kicker was telling.

This season Mellington returns, now as senior assistant coach as well as a player, as the Bears restock for another tilt at the flag.

The club has not been shy in re-signing the vast majority of last season's squad, which finished fourth after a frustrating straight-sets exit in the finals,

The best of them all is Justin Laird, the former Bears coach who last year was a runaway winner of the Frank Harding Medal for the league's top player.

Enjoying the freedom of not having to coach and worry about other players, he polled 28 votes to win the award by 10 from Pyramid Hill's Ben Knight and Bridgewater's Lachlan Sharp.

Still aged under 30, Laird is far

from over the hill, and his brilliant work in midfield can only help Mellington and the other forwards.

In one astonishing match last season against Mitiamo he had 44 disposals, kicked nine goals, took 20 marks, had 21 score involvements and 10 clearances, and accrued a staggering 290 ranking points.

Jarrold Starr joins from Boort in the North Central competition, having previously played with Inglewood, while key forward Luke Crawford has moved from Sandhurst.



Aidan Brohm returns to Serp after a season with North Bendigo in the Heathcote league.

Brohm has played relatively little football over his career but was a revelation when he played with the Bears in 2023, appearing 18 times and being listed among

the best players nine times. Much of his sporting endeavors have been devoted to basketball, where he mainly represented the Castlemaine Cannons.

He spent the 2020-2023 seasons away from football before returning last year.

The versatile big man can play key position back or forward but is likely to mainly assist club legend Nathan Twigg in the ruck, giving the team a strong one-two punch in the critical big man stakes.



Ex-Docker Josh Mellington is

an enigma. As a full-forward he is prolific, and also very demanding of his teammates.

If last season was a guide, Mellington will rarely stray outside the forward-50, and will insist on being the focus of the vast majority of the Bears' attacks.

Whether being senior assistant coach will mellow him — no pun intended — and make him less insistent that players kick to him is yet to be seen.

What is certain is that he will kick goals, often marking and then snapping around the body rather than taking a set shot.

He is powerfully built, a strong mark and an accurate kick.

Another issue to ponder is that Mellington is a whicker away from a lifetime ban from football.

Being suspended for 16 matches over a career means the end.

Mellington is on 14 matches now, and flirted with disaster last season when he challenged a one-match penalty that would have been two if his protest had not been upheld. It's a 'watch' in 2025.

BACK STORY

Bears Lagoon Serpentine was established in 1945 and has played in the Loddon Valley league for all of its existence, in-ning a dozen flags.

The last of those was in 1995, so the Bears will be looking to break a 30-year drought this season. Individual honours have been plenty - the club has won 14 league best and fairest awards including three for Ron Ford

Coaches relish having time to prepare

IT WAS a strange season for Maiden Gully in 2024, with the senior side initially hit with a 12-point deduction because the club didn't field an under-18 team in the Loddon Valley competition.

It's hard to imagine that the penalty — later rescinded by the league — didn't have some impact on the players, despite the club's confidence that the points loss would not be confirmed.

But co-coach Shawn Filo said the players "just went to work" and eventually won four games for the season, finishing second last.

Coaches Filo and former AFL star Angus Monfries had little time to prepare for the 2024 season, being appointed late after more than 20 players departed the club.

This year, things are different. The Eagles have gone on a highly productive recruiting drive that has netted some exciting players.

Filo said the team had lacked depth, quality and experience,

and the re-introduction of the under-18 team this year would be a major boost for Maiden Gully.

Under-16s who were moving up a grade had to go elsewhere to play under-18s football, and the lack of a pathway was sorely felt.



The most exciting addition is Mitch Taylor, who joins from the Northern Territory side Wanderers, where he is captain.

Mason and Tyler James return from Newstead. Tyler was an under-18 premiership player in 2016, and kicked 113 goals the following year.

In three seasons with Newstead

he kicked 178 goals in 54 games, including 59 last year.

Mason was under-18 captain, a best-and-fairest winner for the club and winner of the Loddon Valley league B&F in 2019.

Dan Russell is a critical recruit as a playing assistant coach, adding experience and leadership to a young squad.

Last season's skipper Josh Worsley has recommitted, as has best-and-fairest winner Ed Crisp.

Mitch Taylor has a powerful football CV, and shapes as potentially the league's most dynamic recruit.

Captain of Wanderers in the Northern Territory league, he previously played with West Adelaide in the SANFL and with NT Thunder, as well as time with the Cairns City Lions.

He may not be available for

round one due to state representative commitments in the NT, but is expected to be in the side for most of the season.

Taylor is a versatile player who can hold down centre half-forward or centre half-back roles, and has a prodigious leap.

Filo said he had coached against Taylor, whom he described as "one of the better players I have seen go around."

"He has a lot of strings to his bow," Filo said.



Reigning best-and-fairest winner Ed Crisp was a priority re-signing for Maiden Gully after a

breakout year in 2024. He was named among the best players in nine of the 15 games in which he appeared.

At just 23, his versatility is his major asset, allowing him to slot in at centre half-forward, half-back or even in the midfield.

Filo said Crisp, a Maiden Gully local who first played senior football with the Eagles in 2019, had been outstanding in the club's practice matches coming into the season.

He was vice-captain of the youthful squad last season, with his leadership skills highly prized.

Coming into a season where expectations of the Eagles climbing the ladder are widespread, Crisp's talent, pre-season form and consistency bode well for another strong season. A first-up test will be against Calivil.

BACK STORY

To give it its full name, Maiden Gully YCW joined the Loddon Valley league in 1985, 40 years after its formation and entry into the Golden City league. The football team had virtually instant success, winning a premiership in 1987. Further flags came in 1997, 2001 and 2002. Marty Graham (1997) is the club's only winner of the

Harding Medal, while Steve Robinson (1996) and David McCormack (2006) have taken out the goalkicking award, with McCormack kicking 109 goals. In recent years the club has tried to leave the Loddon Valley for the Heathcote league, but no switch has been able to be made, although the Eagles are clear they wish

to shift. Last season the senior team was penalised 12 premiership points for its failure to field an under-18 team, instead attempting unsuccessfully to enter its junior side in the Bendigo league. The penalty was ultimately rescinded, and Maiden Gully will have an under-18 team in the LVFNL this year.

2025 NORTH CENTRAL FL FIXTURE

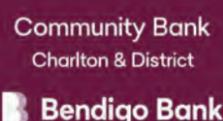


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|--|---|---|---|
| ROUND 1 5 APRIL OPENING ROUND Sea Lake Nandaly v Wedderburn Donald v Calder United Charlton v Birchip-Watchem St Arnaud v Boort | ROUND 2 12 APRIL Calder United v Sea Lake Nandaly (N) Birchip-Watchem v Donald Boort v Charlton Wedderburn v St Arnaud | ROUND 3 26 APRIL Sea Lake Nandaly v Birchip-Watchem Donald v Boort Charlton v St Arnaud Calder United v Wedderburn (W) | ROUND 4 3 MAY Boort v Sea Lake Nandaly St Arnaud v Donald Wedderburn v Charlton Birchip-Watchem v Calder United |
| ROUND 5 10 MAY Sea Lake Nandaly v St Arnaud Donald v Charlton Birchip-Watchem v Wedderburn Calder United v Boort (W) | ROUND 6 24 MAY Charlton v Sea Lake Nandaly Donald v Wedderburn St Arnaud v Calder United Boort v Birchip Watchem | ROUND 7 31 MAY Sea Lake Nandaly v Donald Calder United v Charlton (N) Birchip-Watchem v St Arnaud Wedderburn v Boort | ROUND 8 14 JUNE Wedderburn v Sea Lake Nandaly Calder United v Donald (N) Birchip-Watchem v Charlton Boort v St Arnaud |
| ROUND 9 21 JUNE Sea Lake Nandaly v Calder United Donald v Birchip-Watchem Charlton v Boort St Arnaud v Wedderburn | ROUND 10 28 JUNE Birchip-Watchem v Sea Lake Nandaly Boort v Donald St Arnaud v Charlton Wedderburn v Calder United | ROUND 11 5 JULY Sea Lake Nandaly v Boort Donald v St Arnaud Charlton v Wedderburn Calder United v Birchip-Watchem (N) | ROUND 12 19 JULY St Arnaud v Sea Lake Nandaly Charlton v Donald Wedderburn v Birchip-Watchem Boort v Calder United |
| ROUND 13 26 JULY Sea Lake Nandaly v Charlton Wedderburn v Donald Calder United v St Arnaud (W) Birchip-Watchem v Boort | ROUND 14 2 AUGUST Donald v Sea Lake Nandaly Charlton v Calder United St Arnaud v Birchip-Watchem Boort v Wedderburn | ROUND 15 9 AUGUST Sea Lake Nandaly v Wedderburn Donald v Calder United Charlton v Birchip-Watchem St Arnaud v Boort | ROUND 16 16 AUGUST Calder United v Sea Lake Nandaly (W) Birchip-Watchem v Donald Boort v Charlton Wedderburn v St Arnaud |
| 1ST SEMI FINAL 23 AUGUST | 2ND SEMI FINAL 30 AUGUST | PRELIMINARY FINAL 6 SEPTEMBER | GRAND FINAL 13 SEPTEMBER  |

(N) = Nullawil Football Oval
(W) = Wycheproof Recreation Reserve

NOTES

- General Bye for Easter Long Weekend on 19 April
- General Bye for Hockey Break on 17 May
- General Bye for Kings Birthday on 7 June
- General Bye for School Holidays on 12 July



*The NCNL reserves the right to alter this fixture

2025 LODDON VALLEY FNL FIXTURE



| | | | |
|---|---|--|--|
| <p>ROUND 1 OPENING ROUND 5 APRIL</p> <p>Calivil United v MGYCW Inglewood v Marong Bridgewater v B/L Serpentine Newbridge v Pyramid Hill BYE v Mitiamo</p> | <p>ROUND 2 12 APRIL</p> <p>MGYCW v Bridgewater Marong v Pyramid Hill B/L Serpentine v Inglewood Mitiamo v Calivil United BYE v Newbridge</p> | <p>ROUND 3 26 APRIL</p> <p>Inglewood v Bridgewater MGYCW v Newbridge Calivil United v Marong Pyramid Hill v Mitiamo BYE v B/L Serpentine</p> | <p>ROUND 4 3 MAY</p> <p>Bridgewater v Marong Mitiamo v MGYCW Newbridge v Inglewood B/L Serpentine v Pyramid Hill BYE v Calivil United</p> |
| <p>ROUND 5 10 MAY</p> <p>Calivil United v Newbridge Marong v B/L Serpentine Pyramid Hill v Bridgewater Inglewood v Mitiamo BYE v MGYCW</p> | <p>ROUND 6 17 MAY</p> <p>Bridgewater v Calivil United Pyramid Hill v Inglewood MGYCW v B/L Serpentine Mitiamo v Newbridge BYE v Marong</p> | <p>ROUND 7 24 MAY</p> <p>B/L Serpentine v Mitiamo Marong v MGYCW Newbridge v Bridgewater Calivil United v Inglewood BYE v Pyramid Hill</p> | <p>ROUND 8 31 MAY</p> <p>Pyramid Hill v Calivil United Mitiamo v Marong Newbridge v B/L Serpentine Inglewood v MGYCW BYE v Bridgewater</p> |
| <p>ROUND 9 7 JUNE</p> <p>MGYCW v Pyramid Hill B/L Serpentine v Calivil United Marong v Newbridge Bridgewater v Mitiamo BYE v Inglewood</p> | <p>ROUND 10 14 JUNE</p> <p>MGYCW v Calivil United Marong v Inglewood B/L Serpentine v Bridgewater Pyramid Hill v Newbridge BYE v Mitiamo</p> | <p>ROUND 11 21 JUNE</p> <p>Bridgewater v MGYCW Pyramid Hill v Marong Inglewood v B/L Serpentine Calivil United v Mitiamo BYE v Newbridge</p> | <p>ROUND 12 28 JUNE</p> <p>Bridgewater v Inglewood Newbridge v MGYCW Marong v Calivil United Mitiamo v Pyramid Hill BYE v B/L Serpentine</p> |
| <p>ROUND 13 5 JULY</p> <p>Marong v Bridgewater MGYCW v Mitiamo Inglewood v Newbridge Pyramid Hill v B/L Serpentine BYE v Calivil United</p> | <p>ROUND 14 12 JULY</p> <p>Newbridge v Calivil United B/L Serpentine v Marong Bridgewater v Pyramid Hill Mitiamo v Inglewood BYE v MGYCW</p> | <p>ROUND 15 19 JULY</p> <p>Calivil United v Bridgewater Inglewood v Pyramid Hill B/L Serpentine v MGYCW Newbridge v Mitiamo BYE v Marong</p> | <p>ROUND 16 26 JULY</p> <p>Mitiamo v B/L Serpentine MGYCW v Marong Bridgewater v Newbridge Inglewood v Calivil United BYE v Pyramid Hill</p> |
| <p>ROUND 17 2 AUGUST</p> <p>Calivil United v Pyramid Hill Marong v Mitiamo B/L Serpentine v Newbridge MGYCW v Inglewood BYE v Bridgewater</p> | <p>ROUND 18 9 AUGUST</p> <p>Pyramid Hill v MGYCW Calivil United v B/L Serpentine Newbridge v Marong Mitiamo v Bridgewater BYE v Inglewood</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">NOTES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General Bye for Easter Long Weekend on April 19 • Reconciliation Round to be held on Round 7 (24 May) | |

| | | | |
|--|--|---|---|
| <p>QUALIFYING & ELIMINATION FINALS</p> <p>16 & 17 AUGUST</p> | <p>1ST & 2ND SEMI FINALS</p> <p>23 & 24 AUGUST</p> | <p>PRELIMINARY FINAL</p> <p>30 AUGUST</p> | <p>GRAND FINAL</p> <p>6 SEPTEMBER </p> |
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 **Bendigo Bank**

**Community Bank
Inglewood**