





Nathan Buckley

Fully Focused

Sports psychologist **SIMON LLOYD** talks with recently retired Collingwood captain Nathan Buckley about his mental application to the game, making the transition from player to observer and possibly coach, mentors who have influenced him, the role of a parent, how he coped with the “fig jam” tag, and learning to smell the roses.

Having worked with Nathan Buckley on a daily basis from 2004-07, especially in facilitating Collingwood Football Club’s leadership program, we developed a close relationship, one that continues, even though Nathan has formally moved on from the club.

One of the things that immediately struck me about Nathan is his meticulous and controlled approach to football and life, and his extraordinary ability to cope with intense pressure, both self-created pressure because of his own demanding expectations, and the pressure that came from being the playing leader of one of the country’s biggest sporting institutions.

In many ways, Nathan was misunderstood when he first started playing at AFL level, which is not uncommon in the sports and entertainment worlds, when our perceptions of people are invariably shaped by snippets of information, or by seeing or

being presented only one side of what can be complex characters or circumstances. For example, his desire to be the best player he could, as he explains in the interview, was sometimes labelled as arrogance, a fact that disturbed him, even though he knew he had little control over how other people perceived him.

As well as being a strong and decisive leader, Nathan is also a great team man who, when playing, derived much pleasure from a teammate’s success, especially when that player had made a significant effort to better himself. He was, and still is, however, fiercely competitive (our ongoing workouts at the Lexus Centre attest to this) and beyond football, is finding other avenues to express this, primarily via television and radio, and possibly later into a career in coaching. Nathan the player was always a keen student of the game and its processes, and he has continued in that vein in an organised, almost scientific, desire to make the transition to the next phase of his professional life.

Simon Lloyd: Can you describe your formative years and what you were like growing up?

Nathan Buckley: My formative years are still going. I've never stopped learning along the way. As a kid I was a bit of a class clown, an attention seeker, and I loved to put on a show. We moved around a lot when I was a kid and it was a way for me to fit in. Dad was pretty hard and pretty disciplined and mum was very earthy. I had two very different role models in mum and dad, and they gave me a very solid grounding as a kid. There is no doubt elements of the way I see my life stem from them both.

As a parent myself now, I understand how you can impact your child. In the end, parents can only provide the fundamentals, and it is how you apply them in your life that is your slant on the way you live. In many ways, parenting can be a thankless task; you can do everything right, but you are left at the mercy of your son or daughter to make the right decisions at the right times.

SL: What are the fundamentals you are trying to teach your son Jett?

NB: My fundamentals for life are to keep an open mind and be accepting towards the things you don't have control of, and have very high expectations for what you can control. If he grows up with those abilities, I'll be very happy.

SL: How would you describe yourself?

NB: I have an open mind, but at the same time I am disciplined. I have learnt to enjoy life more as I have gotten older, to stop and smell the roses. I am still working on that, as it doesn't come naturally to me; I am always looking for the next thing to achieve. There is good and bad to that; I think part of being successful, in whatever you do is staying in the present, not living in the past, not living too far in the future, having goals but taking each day as it comes. Now that I have finished my (playing) career, I understand I could have enjoyed it a lot more if I had taken a more holistic view of the environment I was in, what I was part of, what I was achieving. That doesn't make it any less important, but I was always fairly practical, rather than emotional, in my approach. I had a conversation with James Hird towards the end of last year, at Kouta's (Anthony Koutoufides') testimonial. He was saying how good it was to play a game of footy in front of 80,000 people at the MCG, how you had to pinch yourself because of how lucky you felt. I shook my head and said to him, "I am glad you had times like that because,

mate, I never had times like that." Very rarely did I take the time to smell the roses. I was red-lining every time, every minute of every quarter of every game I played. I was always thinking about the next opportunity or the next thing; I never took the time to sit back and soak it up. I am never satisfied. I am pretty hard on myself, and always my own worst critic.



FOR EMPHASIS:
Buckley and Lloyd during the interview.

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SL: How do you move on from 15 years of weekly competition?

NB: I am handling it as well as could be expected. I am missing the camaraderie among the boys, the day-in, day-out banter around the locker room. As soon as we went out on the field, as soon as we were in a weights session, doing our work, I was as professional and straight down the line as you can get. On the other side of that, I loved having a laugh and mucking around with the boys.

SL: You have continued to challenge yourself post-footy by participating in the Sydney to Hobart yacht race and the celebrity race at Melbourne's Formula 1 Grand Prix. What draws you to these activities?

NB: The chance to do something different. I sacrificed lots of things for footy, things I would have loved to do. In retrospect, I realise I could still have done some things and not compromised my football, but my mental focus was the most important thing to me during my playing career and if anything even remotely had the possibility of taking the focus off the game, I said no to it. So, these things are giving me the opportunity to branch out a bit. I've an open mind and have never been afraid to find new experiences and do new things. If you're not doing something to develop yourself, make yourself better in some way, then you're not taking advantage of life's opportunities.

Football gave me parameters I stuck to. I remember going skiing in 1996 at Mt Buller. I had set the bindings on the skis to fall off if I got any lip of snow. I went down a couple of times and felt the knee just stretch a little bit, nowhere near an injury, but I felt I had put myself in an awkward position, so I took the skis off, put them under my arm and walked down the hill and didn't do it again. I never went back there.

SL: What drove you as a footballer?

NB: Throughout my footy career, and increasingly every year, it was getting that elusive premiership. I've always delayed satisfaction and gratification, so the big regret I have is that I was waiting for the ultimate payoff that never came. In the end, I look back and think maybe I should have enjoyed the process more. I spent my whole career shitting myself that I wasn't going to perform to the level, that firstly, I wanted to, and secondly, that people expected me to. It is more of a self-esteem thing.

I have confidence in my ability, but that only comes from the amount of work I have done. If I haven't put the work in, I am not confident. I am not the type of guy who thinks he can wing it. I need to be well prepared; I need to have done the work. That has been the foundation of everything I have done.

SL: So you are motivated by a fear of failure?

NB: No doubt. My fear of failure is three-fold: fear of wasting the hard work, of letting my

“I always lead by example. I’ve never asked anybody to do something that I wasn’t doing myself.”



club and teammates down, and also fear of people finding out I am not as sure of my ability as everyone thinks I am. Talking more generally with people over the last couple of years, both footballers and other successful athletes, a lot of them have that fear of failure. I heard Glenn Archer used to throw up because he was worried about whether or not he was going to let his teammates down. It is actually quite a common motivation. You then go to the other extreme, Robert Harvey. He is the type of guy who has the ability to visualise positively, and he has to be able to see good things happening and that triggers his positive performance. His approach revolves more around thinking positively, and seeing himself do good things. I used to watch highlight tapes and see myself do good things, but usually when I hit the field I was thinking more about

what I had to lose. Does the fear of failure eventually burn you up? There is no doubt I was pretty highly stressed throughout my career because of that fear of failure. In many ways, it is a limiting motivation because I don't think it enables you to get to the maximum of your abilities or your capabilities, but for me it was a crutch I leant on. When I look back, it was a tool that was vitally important, and maybe it was the tool I had to use, because if I had gone the other way, it might not have worked for me.

SL: From where do you think your fear of failure stems?

NB: I suppose it is a self-esteem issue. I just wanted to succeed so badly, I would do anything I needed to do to win and perform to my best, and I was so afraid of not winning or not performing to my best. As a kid you get told if you are a winner, you are better, or winning is better than losing, so it became really important to my self-worth to succeed. Having a goal and achieving it made me feel good. I have a fear of failure, but I am not afraid of it, because it worked for me and got me to where I am. Towards the end of my career I developed an understanding that you can't win all the time and doing your very best is what you should measure yourself on.

SL: Tell me about the epiphany you had regarding winning a premiership.

NB: That happened last year. I had a vision of looking from the outside in and seeing the (Collingwood) boys win the flag. I told the playing group half-way through last year. I told them my overwhelming feeling was one of elation because in some way I was part of it. It took a lot of pressure off me when I was injured and couldn't get back, because I thought I would just try and keep contributing whatever and wherever I could. Of course, if I had had the option of playing in a premiership or not, I would have taken the flag any day. My coping mechanism to deal with that is that I had 15

years at the top of the game, and no one can take those experiences away from me. Not every player has the privilege of playing in a premiership side, but not every one gets to play for 15 years. I am not shattered; there is something missing, but it is not going to be the making or the ending of the rest of my life.

SL: How do you want to be remembered?

NB: As a totally committed and disciplined teammate who basically would do whatever was required to help the club succeed. Having said that, though, how I want to be remembered is not important, as I don't have control over that. I will be remembered by my teammates very differently from how I will be remembered by supporters, very differently to how I will be remembered by opposition supporters. It is all a matter of perspective.

SL: You are currently working with AIS-AFL Academy scholarship players. What lessons are you sharing with them?

NB: The first thing I tell them is to choose a mentor carefully. Players need to attach themselves to the right people early. That one decision can be the making or breaking of their career right there. It is a bit easier to make that decision now, as clubs are more in tune with player and leadership development. They understand they need to spend more time and energy with their investment, the players. I advise them to choose someone with a high work rate, who is professional in their sport. Also, I tell them to have an open mind, listen and ask questions.

SL: Who were your mentors over the years, and what were the lessons they imparted?

NB: Going right back, my old man (Ray) was my mentor, but that was before I was prepared to listen. When I was at boarding school, he used to write me letters and try and point me in the direction of getting out of my comfort zone and working for what I wanted. Going back and reading them as an adult, it is phenomenal, because what he wrote is what I tried to impart to my teammates; if you get comfortable and content you are not going to improve.

Mark Williams and Jack Cahill were great mentors, great examples of how to play footy and set up a club. 'Wallys' (Robert Walls) was fantastic at Brisbane. He had high expectations. Despite the lack of success – we won four games out of 20 in 1993 – his expectations never wavered. He demanded the best of everyone around the place. He was seen as an abrupt coach as he wouldn't suffer fools. If someone didn't perform or didn't give as much as he thought they should, he hit them with physical penalties and got rid of them eventually.

Coming to Collingwood, I latched on to Tony Shaw the first pre-season, and followed him around like a lap dog. I had heard he was the hardest trainer and I thought I would do

whatever he did. That was hard work, and he showed me how to go about it.

Gavin Brown is another, especially the way he attacked the ball on the field. He embarrassed people around him and he embarrassed me because of the way he hit the ball. Even at my most committed to the footy and most courageous, I only ever had a fraction of his fearlessness.

As my career developed, my inspiration and mentors came from my teammates, the people I worked with. I am inspired by anyone who improves or pushes himself beyond the limits he has set prior to that.

SL: The million-dollar question – do you have aspirations to coach?

NB: I definitely think I have the ability, or the fundamentals, to be a good coach. Having said that, there are a lot of pretty good coaches who haven't had long careers, and probably vice-versa, simply because of the structure they had around them. So I think part of preparing for coaching is actually making sure you know exactly what structure you need around you to do your job well and have the club succeed. Of course, you are not going to be able to walk into a club and have it like that from day one, but you need to have the managerial nous and the vision to know exactly how you want it to look. That takes time. The next couple of years for me are about working out how I think it looks best and of course the type of people I will need around me who will breed long-term success.

SL: What will you be doing over the next two years?

NB: A lot of observing. I have my media and AFL commitments. I think I will be brushing shoulders with a lot of very knowledgeable people in the game. By not having an affiliation with one club, I can be exposed to wide-ranging opinions and knowledge I've not had up to this point. What I hope to achieve from that is to reinforce or debunk opinions I have about how the game should be played. Firstly, the on-field aspect, and secondly, how players should be prepared, both physically and psychologically. I have always thought the mental aspect is the most important part of the game. In relation to the structure of a footy club, I will be seeking counsel from people I respect in the industry. I will also have the opportunity to do some managerial study and developing some other skills.

SL: Can you expand on your point about the mental aspect of the game being the most important?

NB: You need to understand there are all sorts of things that could happen in your life but you can't take them on the field. Some players make a mistake and they can't stop thinking about it for the rest of the game, or they have had an argument with their wife or girlfriend

and can't leave it at home. You need to be able to focus on training or the game; you can't reach the right level of intensity if your mind is elsewhere. You need to create an environment where, when you walk out of the locker room, be it at training or a game, you are fully switched on.

SL: What did you learn from Mick Malthouse?

NB: Mick coming to the club at the end of the 1999 season was a huge bonus and benefit. It was a massive part of my career, because if you look at it in isolation, I was able to play four out of eight years in finals under Mick. Bar one finals game, they were the only opportunities I got to play in September, and I can only be thankful for what Mick brought to the club. He definitely was instrumental in creating an environment that made every single player feel empowered. Mick came in off 10 finals series in a row (with West Coast). He knew exactly how a club needed to be structured, and it only took him a couple of years to flip over the culture. I was all for that, because I knew from a leader's perspective where we wanted to go, but I wasn't sure how to get there. Nor were a lot of the people in charge of the club at that time. So, to have a bloke like Mick come in and say, "This is the way we are going to get there" was very important.

Mick was very good at making sure the performance of the 22nd guy in the team was just as important as any other. I was rapt to be able to work in that environment. One of the things that stands out is that he was all about formulating a team that was capable of winning finals, and able to withstand the pressure of finals.

At this point of the interview Nathan's one-year-old son Jett comes in with mum Tania for a goodnight kiss.

NB: Goodnight Jett, good boy. Nigh-night. See-ya bud.

Buckley picks up on his earlier response: If a player did not perform for him (Mick) at the right time of year, he remembered that; he wouldn't forget it. I think coaches, like I said of parents earlier, are left to the whims of 22 individuals who can make different decisions at any time they like. I always thought with Mick that the players knew where they stood with him. They knew if they were on the skids, and they knew if they were playing the type of football he wanted or had the attitude he thought they needed to have.

The balance between the two of us for those years was important. I was so focused on everyone being measured the same way; the same set of minimum expectations in regards to professionalism, how they trained, how they prepared. And that worked because that expectation bred a lot of discipline among the group. You add that to Mick's ability to manipulate and mould individuals around and



ONE LAST EFFORT: Buckley kicks Collingwood forward in what turned out be his last match for the Magpies, last year's preliminary final against Geelong at the MCG

through that structure to achieve what he has. It was a pretty important part of our ability to play some very consistent footy over seasons. Ultimately, we didn't get to where we wanted to go, but I did learn from that relationship.

SL: What are your fondest memories of your time in football?

NB: The best times were playing when the team was at its best. It used to give me so much satisfaction to see a teammate rewarded for work they had done; to start getting respect and kudos, really being rewarded for making a change, for taking something they might have thought previously out of their control and bringing it into their control, changing direction with their career or football. My chest would swell when I saw that. In many ways I like to think I contributed to some of those occasions. To see guys blossom and develop and become great players was my favourite thing, the aspect I think most fondly of.

SL: Very few people get to experience feeling "in the zone". Can you explain how this feels?

NB: Yes, I had periods of seasons where I felt I knew what was going to happen before it happened. You are in the right place at the right time; you feel one step ahead of everyone, and it feels like it is happening in slow motion. You know what people are going to do before they do it. You feel great; you feel supremely confident, but that was probably not a position I was in too often. I would describe it as periods in games, and in your career, where you understood that you were having a profound

influence on a contest. The secret is not to get too carried away with it, because a lot of the things you are doing are instinctive. If you get too conscious of what you are doing, you can go the other way very quickly.

SL: Is sport performance more dependent on natural ability or character?

NB: You can glean a lot about a person's character by watching how they go about sport. It is not just about their natural ability, because you can look at someone and know they can play the game, but that doesn't tell you anything about their character. The way you play the game and apply yourself on the field of battle is definitely a reflection and expression of who you are. As much as people don't want to expose themselves, you can't help but do that. You really are stripped bare on the football field. There are no masks; you can't pull the wool over someone's eyes. You are fully exposed. Everyone gets to see you when you are under pressure, when you are fatigued, when you are ready to play, when you are not ready to play, when you are in the zone, when you couldn't be bothered. Every professional athlete goes through these periods; no-one is up all the time. But the whole idea of being professional is that when the time comes around, you need to find a way to perform. Over a period of time you can see the real character of guys when they play the game.

SL: How did you deal with teammates who didn't share your work ethic?

NB: Not well. I never have suffered people who are not prepared to put the work in. What I

realised along the way is that for some people it is innate, for others it is learned behaviour, and some people just never learn. As long as guys are showing an inclination to improve, and to work at a trait, then I am comfortable.

Two examples for me would be Paul Williams early on and Brodie Holland. 'Willo' was a pretty good runner and went away one season and did a lot of work. He came back an absolute elite runner. He was a great player, pretty dangerous around goals, strong, explosive, but he took himself from one level to the next because he learnt to work harder than he ever had before. Brodie was the same. He had his chance at Fremantle, where he was a chubby forward pocket with a lot of skill but he wasn't showing the work ethic and maximising his talents. Then he came to Collingwood and decided to work hard and base his career around being an aerobic animal. He is self-made.

Your ability to play the game is only going to get you so far; your ability to prepare and train will get you to the highest level possible. It doesn't matter how skilful you are these days, if you can't execute consistently and under pressure, you won't make it.

SL: How would you describe yourself as a leader?

NB: I always lead by example. I've never asked anybody to do something that I wasn't doing myself. And if I ever erred I was the first to put my hand up and take responsibility. I got criticised in the early days for being too motivated, having too high standards, for wanting to succeed too much. The media perpetuated that I was too hard on my teammates. That riled me because they were totally wrong. We all had different styles, and I got better over time at managing the differences, but there are some things you just don't compromise on, such as team discipline, preparation, professionalism, and attitude for success. I used to be fairly blunt and quite abrupt with feedback when I was younger. I realised that didn't actually encourage my teammates, or make it easier for them to improve, and even on some occasions it made it more difficult for them. I still have the same opinion of people who do not work hard, but I learnt to have more empathy and understanding in the way I approached and motivated them.

SL: Is your competitive spirit what got you up to perform at that level constantly?

NB: Yes, my competitive spirit underpinned 15 years of being a footballer, but that is not all I am. I am a person who tries to get the very best out of myself. I am very attuned to how my efforts impact other people's abilities to achieve their goals; I don't want to let myself or anyone else down. It doesn't matter whether it is a social competition or finals footy. The end is irrelevant. For a lot of people the outcome is all they worry about, but I am totally the opposite,



SL: Let's do some free association - tell me the first thing that pops into your head when I say these words.

Football?

NB: Passion.

SL: Collingwood Football Club?

NB: Life.

SL: Tania?

NB: Love.

SL: Jett?

NB: Champion.

SL: Mick Malthouse?

NB: Taskmaster, mentor to a lot of players.

SL: Winning?

NB: Habit.

SL: Regrets?

NB: Waste of time.

SL: Future?

NB: Whatever I want to make it.

SL: Coaching?

NB: Love to.



I care about methods and process. The way you go about things speaks infinitely more than what you achieve.

SL: So would you then describe yourself as being process-orientated?

NB: Yes, ultimately that is what I evolved into. It really helps simplify things. For example, once an injury happens a lot of people would say, "Gee that is no good, I have done my hammy, I am going to miss out on this, and I am going to miss out on that." I could reconcile that in five minutes. This is the situation I am in, and this is what it means. It didn't matter that it had happened three of four times previously.

The other thing is, as much as people wouldn't think so, I didn't really like the focus being on me. When I played and when I expressed myself on the footy field, I was understated. I didn't celebrate goals; I celebrated more when someone else did something. I don't know whether that came because of the opinion people had of me or because when I did show emotion early on, I was told I was cocky or arrogant. Despite that, deep down I became far more excited for my teammates than for myself.

SL: Did the "fig jam" ("F* I'm good, just ask me") tag bother you early on?**

NB: Yeah, it worried me because I had it half-way through the first year of playing AFL footy. Not many people knew me, but it was

obviously the way I was perceived, by someone, and it only had to be one, and then it was in the paper, and then I was an easy target for everyone else. Ultimately, I went about my football as best I could. It is for others to judge how that was perceived.

SL: How did you deal with the last three-to-four years of your career with regard to injury?

NB: It was a struggle. I was not playing for the first half of 2005, and even through 2004 I did my hammy two or three times. The 2006 season was good; I managed to soldier through that, but then 2007 was a nightmare. The last three or four years I was hanging by a thread. I didn't feel like I was on borrowed time, until last year. By that stage I was so wound up and focused on other areas where I could contribute, not just playing. I always felt I was having an influence just by being there for players to talk to, contributing in any way I could. I never ever thought "poor me," but there were periods towards the end of 2007 when I thought, "please just give me a break to get back." I feel like I was very fortunate to get back for those games, and in the end it was almost something very special. I despaired towards the end, but I always knew I was doing everything I possibly could to prepare. So I knew that when it didn't work for me, it wasn't through lack of effort. 🧠

Simon Lloyd, a sports psychologist, is the high performance manager at Collingwood Football Club.