



Transition to the top job

All-conquering St Kilda coach Ross Lyon was fully prepared for a senior coaching role after serving an 11-year apprenticeship as an assistant. In the sixth part of the *AFL Record's* Coaches on Coaching series, the Saints mentor discusses the transition from assistant to senior coach.

'Serving as an assistant coach was crucial in preparing me to step up to senior coaching,

but the importance of such an apprenticeship will differ depending on the individual.

Much depends on how focused you are on becoming a coach when you get towards the end of your playing career.

My desire to go down this path was not high and, in some ways, I fell into coaching when a part-time assistant's role came up under my former Fitzroy and Brisbane Bears coach Robert Walls at Richmond in 1996.

Injury had forced me to retire from the Bears at the end of 1995 and I was probably one

of the first players straight out of the game to be appointed an assistant – I remember Walls wanted the perspective of a recently retired player on his coaching panel.

But I think now players see a career path in coaching and assistant coaching.

The money has grown and the opportunities are great and players are starting to prepare themselves before they retire by doing level one, two and three coaching courses.

The full-time nature of the football club environment today means players are constantly interacting with coaches and line coaches and have a strong handle on what coaching involves, whereas when I started, it was a transition period for coaching

and full-time football – a lot of the standard coaching structures and meetings have evolved in the past 10 years.

Clearly someone like Michael Voss has shown the modern-day player can go straight into senior coaching, but I think, if you do an apprenticeship as an assistant, it helps prepare you more fully.

It's also a question of what gaps there are in your knowledge, recognising those gaps and surrounding yourself with the right people to help you bridge them.

When I joined Richmond, it opened a coaching path for me and, once I was on it, I had a desire to improve and get better at it. I'm the first to admit I was very green. I knew my football, but my ability to teach and work with players, and to plan and prepare, were areas I needed to grow in.

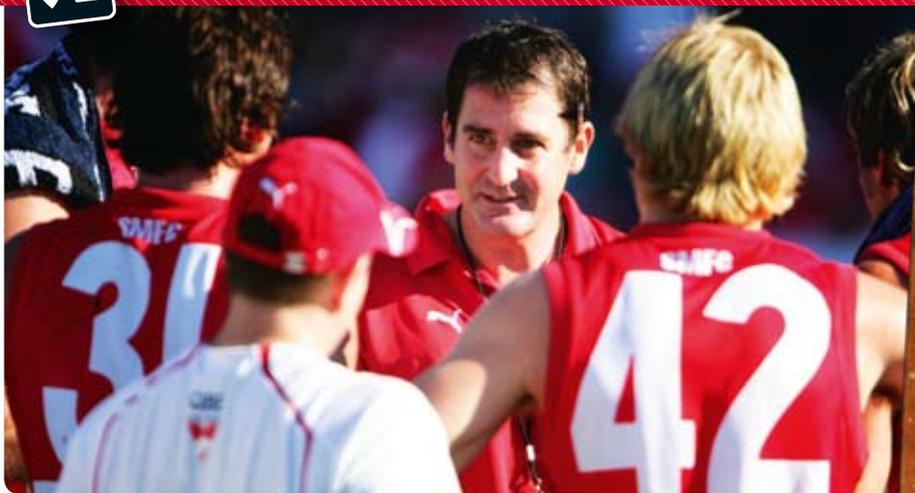
I didn't embark on the role at

the Tigers with any clear view of becoming a senior coach, nor did I feel an insatiable urge to become a senior coach for much of my time as an assistant. I just felt I had so many areas to experience and learn, and that was what I focused on.

I worked primarily with Richmond's defence under Walls from 1996-97 and went full-time under Jeff Gieschen from 1998-99, when I again worked mainly with the defence.

I moved to Carlton in 2000 when David Parkin offered me the opportunity to coach its VFL side, which I did for three years, in addition to assisting in the AFL coach's box on match-days.

In 2003, when Denis Pagan took over as coach and Carlton became affiliated with the Northern Bullants in the VFL, I worked as an assistant, focusing on zones, kick-ins and working with specific players. >>>



LEARNING PHASE: Lyon was primarily responsible for Sydney's midfielders and their work at stoppages during his tenure as an assistant with the Swans.

Coaching Carlton's VFL side in my own right was critical for my development. Watching games unfold on game-day, identifying problems and finding solutions, I got challenged consistently with different situations that were thrown up.

When you are the coach, you also learn to connect with your players and I enjoyed that.

When I stopped coaching in the VFL, I really missed it. That's when I thought I really liked coaching a team. From 2004-06, I worked at the Sydney Swans under Paul Roos, focusing on the midfield, with a strong bent on midfield stoppages.

When the opportunity came up to interview with St Kilda at the end of '06, I was starting to feel I needed a new challenge beyond assistant coaching.

For the first time, I felt the urge to put my own imprint on a club.

But as much as you learn as an assistant coach, when you start as

a senior coach, you find more and more areas you have to grow in.

I think the major adjustment I had to make at St Kilda has been well documented. I walked into a club with a fair bit of expectation. I thought I was prepared for the media scrutiny but, when it comes, the intensity of it can surprise you.

“In terms of delegation, I like to put people in roles and give them strong guidelines and let them go”

ROSS LYON

As senior coach, you need to prepare and plan for media interaction more than you think initially. For me, it was about understanding the role the media plays, the importance of it and being able to give them good content.

As senior coach, you have

also got to realise you are the biggest influence on your senior players, your team and your football department, so you have got to carry yourself accordingly at all times.

As an assistant, you have a set role and may work closely with 10-12 players, but as a senior coach, you have got to be across every player on your list and all of your staff. There's a lot more man management and I think in this area I got a lot of things right. Did I do it perfectly? No. But you can plan and read all the leadership and coaching books you want, but until you are placed in those day-to-day situations and the losses are mounting, it's hard to prepare yourself fully.

The task of assembling your team of assistant coaches is an intense period. You want to create a complementary team; you can't have all the same types of people. Fundamentally, when I

interviewed people, I was looking for great character, a strong work ethic and football knowledge.

And now we've got a great team at the Saints – Stephen Silvagni, Tony Elshaug, Leigh Tudor and development coaches Andy Lovell and Danny Sexton.

In terms of delegation, I like to put people in roles and give them strong guidelines and let them go. But you have got to stay close enough to people to keep them accountable and ensure you know what is going on.

With your coaching team, it's about getting your assistants on the same page as yourself. The art is ensuring they understand what you want and can get it done. If this doesn't happen, you have got a problem.

With my team, it took a little bit of time for them to understand what I wanted. But now I'm so confident in them that I think >>

KEYS TO COACHING

- 1 Recognise the gaps in your experience and surround yourself with the right people to help you bridge them.
- 2 Understand the role the media plays, the importance of it and being able to give them good content.
- 3 You are the biggest influence on your players, team and football department, so carry yourself accordingly.
- 4 Believe in your game-plan and stick with it; by chopping and changing you can lose your players' confidence.
- 5 Not everyone is equal in playing ability but everyone on your list has the right to be treated fairly.
- 6 Ensure your assistants are on the same page as you, so they understand what you want and can get it done.



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ON SHOW: Lyon understands the senior coach is the biggest influence on a club's players.

I could miss a month or two and the way we'd go about our training and preparation would be the same, regardless.

As a senior coach, the game-plan you bring to the club is obviously one of the key planks of what you stand for.

Ultimately, you have got to sell it and its principles – you are essentially saying to the club and players, 'Follow this and you will be successful'.

You only have a limited window of opportunity to deliver on this for the playing group to believe in your plan and run with it.

I think the great coaches have got strong game-plans and beliefs that have stood the test of time. They have shown they can bring wins through the door and their players believe in, and support, them.

It is ridiculous to think our nine rookies are equal to our established senior group, but they will all be treated just as fairly

ROSS LYON

I think a coach that chops and changes every week and doesn't have a strong belief in his game-plan can lose the confidence of his players, and affect their ability to play instinctively.

It takes time to build good relationships with your players when you start as senior coach. Relationships are about trust so, to build trust, you must show integrity and consistency in everything you do. You have to understand that not everyone is equal in playing ability but everyone has the right to be treated fairly – that is my overriding philosophy.

It is ridiculous to think our nine rookies are equal to our established senior group, but they will all be treated just as fairly.

Match-day coaching is another area that requires adjustment. As an assistant, you are more likely to throw up lots of different ideas. It is a case of all care, no responsibility.

As much as you felt the pressure to make the right call as an assistant, you didn't have to make the final decision, so you didn't feel the responsibility you do as senior coach.

Ultimately, the senior coach makes the final call and, whatever

decision is made, the result is going to rest on his shoulders.

Senior coaching also requires you to be across areas such as fitness and conditioning, list management and recruiting.

Here, it's about getting the right people in, being across what they do, but empowering them to do their job.

As much as I monitor the performance of my staff, I'm always striving to improve my own performance and seek constant feedback from mentors.

I work with a sports clinical psychologist once a week. He observes me in the coach's box and my meetings and gives me weekly feedback.

There are a couple of ex-AFL coaches I might catch up with monthly or bi-monthly for a cup of tea and a talk. I've also got friends I can catch up with and they help keep things in perspective, reminding me where I am from and emphasising the value of family and friends, which is good.

I feel privileged to be in my role. I feel privileged to be coaching St Kilda.

But my team and I work very, very hard to provide a great environment our players want to be part of and where they can express their talent, improve and enjoy winning games of AFL footy.

If we can do that, we are a long way towards being a good club.

AS TOLD TO NICK BOWEN



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