



The art of defence

To be a successful team, you must have a strong defence. As Collingwood mentor Mick Malthouse explains in the first of an *AFL Record* series on coaching, history has shown this to be an indisputable fact.

As a coach, you need evidence to reinforce your message in everything you do because players will inevitably question your methods. But defence is an easy sell because the evidence is patently clear: premiership teams have strong defensive mechanisms.

It's not something you dream up and players think: 'What's he talking about?' It's historical fact – you only need to take a cursory glance at premiership sides to work that out – and coaches must acknowledge history.

Of course, defence is not a modern phenomenon. As much as defensive methods have changed and been given increasing emphasis, it's very much a case of everything has changed but nothing has changed. Defence is as old as the game itself.

Although Australian Football has been going 150 years, very few people would make this observation: you don't kick to your goals, you kick to the opposition's goals. You're trying to penetrate each other's defences. The original rules of the game state it clearly. Even back then, defence was part of the grand plan.

If you don't believe me, watch field umpires when they pay free kicks: they don't point to the end you're kicking to, they point to the other end, your actual goals – the one you are defending. The game was designed around the protection of your own goals.

People assume that my coaching philosophies stem from the fact I was a backman from the Allan Jeans era of defence,

but the fact is it doesn't matter what your playing background is, most coaches come around to that way of thinking anyway.

For instance, Leigh Matthews kicked 900-odd goals (915) and was probably the best rover/forward-pocket player of all time, but Leigh would be the first to acknowledge that to be successful, you need to be good enough defensively to limit the opposition's scoring, as well as kick goals yourself.

I'm not saying you need to be the best defensive side because there are numerous other things you must do extremely well to be successful, but you need to understand its importance.

Defenders save games; forwards win games. Whether defenders also win games will always be a matter of conjecture

If you examine other ball sports like soccer, rugby union, rugby league, gridiron, hockey and polo, the single most talked-about issue is how to defend the ball. That doesn't mean you're ignoring offensive play – you need good scorers, too.

Defenders save games; forwards win games. Whether defenders also win games will always be a matter of conjecture. The point is: a good team has a balance of offense and defence.

A classic example was the contrasting careers of two champion goalkickers – Tony Lockett and Jason Dunstall. Lockett kicked the record number of goals but didn't win a premiership with St Kilda or

Sydney, while Dunstall kicked almost as many goals for Hawthorn and was a member of four premiership sides.

It's little wonder the Hawks were so successful for so long when you consider that in addition to a superb forward line, they also boasted defenders the calibre of Gary Ayres, Chris Langford and Chris Mew.

It's no coincidence that St Kilda and Geelong have been the two top sides this season. Although many people associate their success with Nick Riewoldt's form and the brilliance of Gary Ablett and Steve Johnson, the reality is they have been the hardest teams to score against.

If you were writing a script on how to win a premiership, the first thing you'd want settled is your back six. Of course, that doesn't always happen. Last year, for example, we had Simon Prestigiacomo for only two games. Similarly, Hawthorn would be a better side with Trent Croad at centre half-back.

Although the basics of backline play have remained familiar – ie. you want to stop your opponent and clear the ball from the danger area – numerous factors have combined to change the general style of play from defence.

For instance, we rarely play on boggy grounds now; playing surfaces are first-class, which enables players to run on top of the ground and show their wares.

Once upon a time, when you kicked in from full-back, you'd kick long and wide to the side of the ground that was favoured by the wind, or the side that was boggiest.

FACT FILE

Mick Malthouse

Born: August 17, 1953

Coaching career: Footscray (1984-89), West Coast (1990-99), Collingwood (2000-)

Games: 602 (Footscray 135, West Coast 243, Collingwood 224)

Record: 337 wins, 261 losses, 4 draws

Winning percentage: 56

Finals: 40

Premierships: 2 (West Coast 1992, 1994)

Now teams try to take the ball down the middle where possible, and the opposition try to guard against it so they don't concede 'coast-to-coast' goals.

This has been brought about by a change in tactics rather than a change in mentality, because you still want to stop sides.

There is a far more defensive mindset at stoppages these days. Long gone are the days of rovers such as Bobby Skilton running free one way and Billy Goggin running free the other at a centre bounce and just allowing the best ruckman to put the ball in their path for a clean takeaway. We don't want the Chris Judds and Gary Ablett's running free.

You want your ruckman to ensure the ball goes to areas where the opposition can least hurt you, while still being as offensive as possible yourself. It's about finding that balance.

We expect good offensive play from our backmen, but if you give too much room to a Brendan Fevola or a 'Buddy'



WORDS OF WISDOM: Master coach Mick Malthouse is from the school that firmly believes a strong defence is the key to a team's success.

Franklin, they'll kick eight or 10 goals. Therefore, the first priority is always to beat your direct opponent.

You generally find that the back six are a team within a team because they rely heavily on one another and share the pain of a goal scored against them.

In the forward line, mistakes don't appear to be as costly because they don't necessarily result in goals to the opposition, whereas turnovers in the backline often result in shots at goal.

In many ways, it's tougher now for backmen than ever before. In light of rule changes relating to hands-in-the-back and chopping-the-arms, I joke with my forwards about how easy they've got it compared to backmen.

But that's a backman's lot: they have to contend with having a low profile, high pressure and having their mistakes magnified.

The rushed-behind rule has also forced a change in mindset because players have

to think more before they act. But that's why they are full-time footballers: they have to practise their art. And anyway, players are like kids: they are very resilient and they adjust very quickly to anything that's thrown at them.

It's important to adjust quickly to situations on the field – not only in contests, but also with match-ups.

In my day, the rover changed with the forward pocket two or three times a quarter and the key forwards generally stayed in position, but at times these days, the opposition can rotate between the midfield, bench and forward line, which makes it crucial to get the match-ups right.

Fortunately for us, our captain, Nick Maxwell, plays in defence, and we also have the experience of players such as Prestigiacomo.

We don't give our backmen carte blanche to make changes as they see fit, but we have faith

in our back six, particularly in our captain, who discusses potential changes and match-ups with our defensive coach, Mark Neeld, in the week leading up to the match. We trust Nick to implement those changes as they arise.

I think most backlines would operate in a similar way, where they empower a designated player to make those alterations. Otherwise, we just send a runner out to do it.

Leadership is paramount, especially in the back half. For decades, genuine playmakers have been swung to the backline and added another dimension to their team.

In the '70s, Keith Greig and Francis Bourke were wonderful wingmen, and captains, who made terrific transitions to defenders. More modern examples include Gavin Wanganeen and Andrew McLeod, both wonderful

KEYS TO COACHING

- 1 Coaching is not a popularity contest. If it was, I wouldn't be doing it.
- 2 As you climb higher up the ladder as a leader, you become more isolated, more insular and you have to make more sacrifices.
- 3 Development is the No. 1 word in coaching.
- 4 If you want your side to be hungry, bring in hungry people.
- 5 Study the opposition coach first and you'll get a fair indication of how his side will play.
- 6 It's unfair to judge a coach purely on win/loss ratios because the best team doesn't necessarily have the best coach.

Source: *The Champions: Conversation with Great Players & Coaches of Australian Football*, by Ben Collins, Slattery Media Group, 2006.

ball-getting players who became almost uncontrollable when you gave them any space.

They made the back half their own, amassing midfield stats and delivering so well. You couldn't say they didn't defend well – they were great defenders because they usually had the ball. 