



UNDER INSTRUCTIONS: During the week, Matthew Knights and his assistants set about planning and preparing for the challenge ahead.



The importance of preparation

Meticulous preparation throughout the week is crucial to success on game-day, as Essendon coach Matthew Knights explains in the fifth part of the *AFL Record's* 'Coaches on Coaching' series.

In 15 years at Richmond, I played under six coaches – Kevin Bartlett, Allan Jeans, John Northey, Robert Walls, Jeff Gieschen and Danny Frawley. It wasn't ideal. However, from a coaching perspective, it has been a godsend because it has equipped me a wealth of knowledge and exposure to different methods, philosophies and ways to communicate.

Along the way, I have learned that preparation is one of the keys to success – in any walk of life.

I firmly believe that if you prepare yourself in the best possible manner, you'll give

yourself an opportunity to beat any opponent.

Perhaps the most important part of preparation is reviewing the previous match. This starts immediately after the game with your interaction with the players.

I go home that night and watch footage of the game. With technology these days, every on-field act is coded, which makes it easy to pinpoint different aspects of the game – inside 50s, rebound 50s, stoppages, etc.

The coaching panel conducts its review initially and then we go through it with the players.

Players play a much bigger role in the review process than they ever did.

They are often one of your best resources in working out what went right and wrong on the day. They see things from a different perspective because they're out in the thick of it, and their views can be very beneficial to the group. We find that refreshing.

I also meet with the leadership group most Mondays for a general discussion about the previous game and how we might approach the week ahead.

Early in the week, generally on Tuesdays, we start looking at our next opponent. Our opposition analyst, Craig Jennings, watches opponents for two or three weeks before we play them and provides us

with a detailed report on how they play. The other coaches then have their input, and from that we decide what we need to work on during the week.

You might say: "We need to develop and focus on this part of our game because we feel it's an area we can really get some upside."

The way a club goes about its review and preparation will vary depending on where they think they are in their development.

At Essendon, we have a reasonably young list that is in the second year of a new program, so we're planning for the medium to long-term, with an emphasis on learning and development. As a result,





DEFINING ROLES: On game-day, Matthew Knights believes some players like to have one consistent role to play, while others prefer to multi-task.

we're more centrally focused on our game rather than the opposition's.

But as we improve over the next season or two, I'm sure we'll pay increasing attention to the opposition.

We're very mindful of not getting ahead of ourselves and trying to get the cream on the cake because, in reality, we're still just trying to get the ingredients right. In my view, we've still got a long way to go to instil the basics of football into our playing group.

We might have three or four different styles or game-plans that we try to implement at different stages of games, but

they don't come to fruition overnight. It might take a season or two for it to gel, so you have to ensure your players adapt well.

Our methodology is that we want to get certain styles right before we move on to others. You might put more time and resources into some styles than others, and as you get better at one area, you might shift the focus a little.

With younger players, you shouldn't move too fast or throw too much at them because you'll risk overloading them with information and overlooking the basics, which will always be a crucial part of the game.

The best players do the basics very well. Our veteran defender Dustin Fletcher is a perfect example of that. In many ways, Dustin is a genius because he hits targets he's meant to hit, he closes space when he has to, he applies a spoil when he needs to, and so on. He does exactly what's required, which makes him very predictable to his teammates.

A coach also needs to examine what's required in his role and delegate responsibilities to his assistant coaches accordingly. If you try to do everything yourself, you'll spread yourself too thin.

I tend to delegate most early in the week to give our assistants the chance to take drills, work on reviews, take line meetings, etc. It helps their development as coaches and also gives the players a break from me – I'm sure they don't want to hear my voice all the time!

Everyone gets a break on Wednesdays, when staff can take part of the day off. I take the morning off and take my kids to school and have breakfast with my wife. *(Knights and wife Carolyn have a son, Zachary, nine, and a daughter, Alisha, seven.)*

KEYS TO COACHING

- 1 Preparation is one of the keys to success – in any walk of life.
- 2 Perhaps the most important part of preparation is the review of the previous match.
- 3 Players are often one of your best resources in working out what went right and wrong on game-day.
- 4 With a reasonably young list, focus more on your game than the opposition's.
- 5 Don't overload younger players with information because you'll risk overlooking the basics.
- 6 Delegate responsibilities to assistants. If you try to do everything yourself, you'll spread yourself too thin.
- 7 You're dealing with young men's careers, so don't take selection decisions lightly.
- 8 Ensure you've done all you can to help your team perform at its best.

The life of an AFL coach is consumed by football, but you need an outlet somewhere, so I try to go for the odd run or bike ride. And when I go home at night, I completely switch off from footy and try to spend some quality time with my family.

It's all systems go from Thursday, when we're generally focusing on our opponent. We go through the theory as a group in an auditorium, and then work on the practical side of it during 'closed' training sessions, hopefully away from prying eyes – although you could watch training at Windy Hill from the street!



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At match committee meetings, we go through a set criteria – which I imagine would be fairly similar at most AFL clubs – where we look at the opposition and their strengths, and then we look at our own strengths and the way we want to play.

Then we select our team, which could take four hours of discussion – and so be it, because it's vital to get it right. You also have to realise you're dealing with young men's careers, so you should never take selection decisions lightly.

We watch footage of our VFL side, the Bendigo Bombers, from the previous week to have a look at players who are pushing up for senior selection.

I find it strange when people talk about devising plans A, B, C and so on to cover all contingencies. I don't subscribe to that theory. I think all clubs adopt different styles and tempos, and many, like us at Essendon, have players who can play in multiple positions; it's just that some clubs are better in their execution.

I try to give players three days' notice of the role we

want them to play. Sometimes circumstances prevent that. For instance, if we're unsure if a few players will be passed fit, it might be delayed by 24 hours.

Some players have a consistency of role, and they actually prefer that, while others might play three different roles in a game – we have a few players like that and it suits them. Working out what suits each individual is part of the people management and psychology of coaching.

My movements on game eve can vary. If we're playing a Friday night game, I'll go to Windy Hill to help out with the Bendigo Bombers training. Adrian Hickmott runs the session, but I'll have a run around with the young players. I enjoy that. It's another outlet. Then I'll have a quiet afternoon when I might think about

RELAXED: Matthew Knights says it is important to stay calm for the players' sake.



some 'what if' scenarios that might eventuate.

If we're playing the next day, I'll either have a quiet night at home or, if there's a game at Docklands or the MCG, I'll go along and watch it from a strategy point of view.

I don't have any sleepless nights before games, and that comes from feeling prepared. That might not be the case if there are question marks swirling through your mind.

That relaxation generally extends into game-day. It's important I stay relaxed for the players' sake – I don't think it helps them if they see the coach tense and wound-up.

The reality is we do the vast majority of our preparation beforehand, so when game-day comes along we can just let the players play.

I endeavour to get to the ground early to prepare and write whatever I need to do on the

whiteboards. It's a quiet, chilled-out period.

We leave the players to their own devices, but they can come to us for any final instructions.

I don't try to gauge the attitude of players before a game. A few people have tried to do that in the past, but I don't think it reflects in performance.

Besides, we've got a real variance in ages at Essendon – players like Michael Hurley are 19 and then there's Dustin, who's 34. They've got different set-ups at home, so they're all going to prepare differently. You just assume that as professional footballers they arrive switched on.

I address the players twice on game-day: the first is a brief chat about an hour before the game, and I'll address them again a minute or two before they run out. There might also be a few brief one-on-ones in between.

Then it's game on. As coach, you want to be certain you've done all you can to help your team perform at its best. The rest is up to the players.

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