



**NEW CHALLENGE:** Michael Voss has made a fairly seamless transition from player to coach by setting clear goals and plans.

# The transition from player to coach

A coaching career is a natural progression for many players after their playing days are over. In the third part of the *AFL Record's* coaching series, first-year Brisbane Lions mentor Michael Voss explains the challenges of going from being one of the boys to being the boss.

**T**hroughout my playing days, coaching wasn't a burning ambition until I came towards the end of my career. But the closer the end came, the stronger my ambition became.

Coaching appealed to my competitive spirit, something my mentor Leigh Matthews described as "a black hole that you will never fill".

Throughout this transition period, it was evident I needed to give greater thought to coaching and gather further information.

The one fundamental for any coach is to develop your own philosophies and game style. This involves compiling information from what you know, what you've learnt, what you've seen, what others have done, what mistakes have been made by you and others, and what your own strong beliefs are.

You should also constantly look and learn – from mentors, books, tapes, courses, former coaches, current coaches, teams, business practices, academic models and other codes – capturing and formulating the relevant

information that can be understood, communicated and acted on.

All this knowledge should be captured progressively rather than at one time. It's also an endless process, some of these ideas form before you start, others will form as you go.

As a coach, the people you lead will be influenced by your character traits and leadership attributes, namely your beliefs, values, ethics, knowledge and skills. Given this, you better know yourself well.

So ensure that the philosophies you take on are yours. Everyone, and I

mean everyone, approaches coaching in their own unique way – their view of the world shapes their decision-making as a coach and what they believe are the right decisions.

Once you've formulated the basis of your coaching philosophies, you get some genuine outcomes on how you want to run your club, what you think will be successful and how you will get the best out of your players.

When I retired as a player and contemplated the next phase of my life, there was no better time to reflect on my current strengths and weaknesses, 



and honestly assess what skills and capabilities I did and didn't have.

I also sought out others for honest feedback. I had to be prepared to hear about my shortcomings, but this helped me identify the skills I thought I needed to develop to step into coaching.

I could then set a plan and time frame in which to do this. As time progressed, this plan was adjusted to meet any changing expectations or achievements.

During this time, I was also determined to get away from the football club environment. To look at our sport and others from a different viewpoint.

After living a very rigid lifestyle as an AFL player for 15 years, doing this gave me the freedom to develop at my own pace, without being locked into the day-to-day routine of a club environment.

That said, no amount of planning could have prepared me when I finally came to coach.

The position of head coach is highly complex and has a unique skill set, so working in any other job, be it as an assistant or as a media commentator, is certainly not adequate preparation on its own.

Setting expectations early is critical as a coach. It sets the platform for how the players treat you and how you treat them.

It was even more important for me given my history with some players that I had played premierships with and, unshamedly, called my mates.

However, you must retain your professional integrity. No doubt my relationship with these players has changed. The important part to remember is that the people involved have not changed, you just have a new role and title. But parties must appreciate the new relationship and respect each other's positions.

Utilise any past relationship with your players as a positive but be aware of its challenges. I enjoy the rapport I have with the players, which would normally be earned over a long period of time. I can confide in them, seek their opinions and I know they will be honest.



**IMPRESSIVE START:** Michael Voss has the Lions in fifth place with a 10-6 win-loss record in just his first year as senior coach.

**Changing from one leadership style to another requires patience as new training methods, reporting procedures, game-plans and system, and team dynamics are introduced**

Our aim is to set the best football program possible, and the more the players buy into this, the more successful we will be.

As a player, I enjoyed being one of the boys and mucking around, and that hasn't changed much as a coach. I don't mind a joke and I've got some pretty bad ones at that. But I've always been intense and never lose sight of the job that has to be done.

I'll be very complimentary when we achieve our goals and I'll have a crack at people when I don't think we have lived up to expectations.

No doubt, the first big assignment I had as Brisbane Lions coach was delisting my former premiership teammate Robert Copeland. That was particularly tough because Robbie had always done everything that was asked of him and maximised his capabilities as an individual.

He probably would have been a worthwhile player for us this year, but, as a club, we wanted to go in a different direction and try some other players in his role.

I thought it was relevant to suggest to Robbie that he might only play eight or nine games this year if he was lucky, and I didn't think it was fair to take him on on that basis, given his desire to play a more prominent role.

The transition from player to coach does take time, as

does the transition from one leader to the next.

Taking over from Leigh Matthews, who as a three-time Lions premiership coach was obviously a club legend, has taken time, especially after his 10-year reign.

Changing from one leadership style to another requires patience as new training methods, reporting procedures, game-plans and system, and team dynamics are introduced.

Whether it was changes to our playing leadership structure or pre-season training, a fair bit has changed at the Lions in a short period of time.

Having a committed group of coaches and service group is critical for a coach. The team of people responsible for preparing our players work feverishly behind the scenes to ensure each maximises their capability.

Balancing this teams' skills, experience and characteristics with your own helps shape your performance and the environment you surround the players with.

I thought it was important I had some experienced assistants who I could bounce ideas off, which was why I appointed (former Carlton coach) Wayne Brittain and Craig Brittain (who coached in the QAFL).

Each assistant coach will have their own philosophy, and there may be plenty of things they

**KEYS TO COACHING**

- 1 Start developing your own coaching philosophies as soon as possible, building your knowledge from as many sources as possible.
- 2 Do a complete analysis of your skills and develop a plan to acquire the skills you view as fundamental for a coach.
- 3 Putting your own stamp on a club takes time; let it evolve naturally.
- 4 When appointing your assistant coaches, their skill sets should complement your own.
- 5 It's OK to be one of the boys at times, provided you don't lose sight of the job that has to be done.
- 6 You should set aside downtime every week to make sure you stay fresh and can cope with the demands of the job.

would do differently if they were senior coach. But it's absolutely crucial when they come into the club they take on the head coach's philosophies and, wherever possible, speak in the same language to the players, so they get a consistent message.

The more time you spend thrashing out ideas with your assistants and getting to know them, the more you entrust them with responsibilities. And, on an ongoing basis, that's what you want to be able to do.

I knew coaching would be very demanding and require an extremely high work ethic, and it's been what I expected and more.

The one thing that has struck me, though, is that you're thinking the whole time.

As a player you get to tune off, but as a coach you don't. And that's probably a skill I haven't mastered yet. As a new coach, I'm trying to give myself some downtime and a mental rest at times. And I assume this won't change anytime soon.

AS TOLD TO NICK BOWEN