



HOW TO PLAY | THE SCIENCE OF KICKING

Collingwood star Alan Didak is renowned as one of the best kicks in the AFL. In this first of a series highlighting the skills of Australian Football, the Magpie talks about why he is such a good kick and has some sound advice for footy's next generation. **By Howard Kotton.**

Alan Didak's ability to kick the football with uncanny accuracy and precision did not happen overnight.

The talented Magpie honed his skills over many years of practice

in the backyard and at school in South Australia.

As a youngster, Didak practised at every opportunity. "Most of the time I was kicking the footy with my mates," he said. As Didak swings on to his trusty left foot,

the hopes of the vast Magpie army are raised in expectation.

Whether it's putting a drop punt down a teammate's throat or a miraculous snap from the boundary, he rarely lets them down.

But even the best kicks in the game have an off day, just as he did when he missed a crucial goal against North Melbourne two weeks ago.

In the heat of action every week, Didak says he does not have time to think about his kicking too much – he just does what comes naturally.

"I honestly don't even think about it, I just do it. Hopefully it comes off," Didak said.

When he has time to go back behind the mark and kick the ball, Didak's major priority is to ensure he is "nice and relaxed".

"I just walk back and take a couple of deep breaths," he said. "When I'm having a shot for goals, I make sure my body is facing the goals and keep telling myself, 'just kick straight'."

Didak prefers to use his left boot, although he admits he is kicking more on his non-preferred right these days.

"I'm pushing up the ground a lot more and probably getting caught on my right-hand side a fair bit," he said.

Despite being one of the best kicks in the AFL, Didak continues to work hard on his kicking at training.

He has some advice for youngsters aspiring to kick as well as he does. "Make sure you get out there in a backyard or a paddock and keep practising your technique," he said.

"Make sure you hit the target and practise on both sides of the body. And make sure you're improving your kick because there's no point practising unless you're getting better." ■

• TECHNICAL ADVICE COURTESY OF THE AFL DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT.

KEY TO REACHING THE TOP

Kicking is the most important skill in Australian Football. The basic skill of kicking should be taught at a young age and any faults rectified. It is important players learn the right technique while they are young.

Each week most AFL players demonstrate the ability to (a) kick under pressure; (b) pass the ball accurately to a teammate; and (c) use the ball to the best advantage of their side when kicking from a set position.

POINTS TO REMEMBER WHEN KICKING THE BALL

1. Line up your body with the target. Have your head slightly bent over the ball. Hold the ball over the thigh of the kicking leg.
2. Guide the ball down with one hand.
3. Point your toes at your target – watch the ball hit the foot.
4. Follow through straight towards the target.

The preferred kick among AFL players is the drop punt.



1 As he prepares to kick, Didak is balanced as he runs towards his target, with his weight on his kicking leg.

2 Didak takes a long last stride to help generate power, while the non-guiding arm swings out and back for balance.

3 He drops the ball vertically with his guiding hand as he is about to make contact with his boot. His support leg braces his body while the knee is tightly flexed before quickly extending for contact. The non-guiding hand comes forward, while his head is still over the ball.

4 Didak's leg accelerates through impact as his body drives forward and up. Contact is made high on his instep and he follows through towards the target with his head still.

HOW TO PLAY | HANGING WITH THE BEST

Who better to advise on how to take a 'speccie' than 'The Birdman' himself, Brett Burton. **By Nick Bowen.**

Brett Burton has always loved flying for 'speccies' but as a junior his coaches encouraged him to stay down and crumb.

Ironically, Burton has since become so well known for his high-flying marks after debuting for the Crows in 1999 that he is now almost universally known as 'The Birdman'.

Burton says it was not until a growth spurt in his late teens that he literally started to take off.

"When I was growing up I was quite small, I was 172cm until I was about 19," Burton said.

"So all of my coaches throughout my juniors would encourage me to stay down and crumb."

Unperturbed, Burton continued to practise his high marking in kick-to-kick sessions at school and by himself at home, where he spent countless hours, kicking the ball high in the air and launching himself at it, always trying to take it at its highest point.

Burton's practice eventually paid off. After a growth spurt

took him close to his current height of 185cm, Burton broke into Glenelg's SANFL team at 19 in 1998. Playing at centre half-forward, he finally had a licence to fly for his marks and The Birdman was hatched.

Drafted by the Crows at the end of that season, Burton brought his one-man air show to the AFL.

Much to the delight of crowds across the country, his three coaches at Adelaide – Malcolm Blight, Gary Ayres and Neil Craig – gave him free rein to continue doing what he does best.

Now in his 10th AFL season, Burton says high marking has become almost second nature to him, so much so he rarely practises it.

"It certainly comes naturally to me now and you're best to stop thinking about it too much and just letting it flow," he said.

"For me, it's really all about the timing. What I tell myself is when you see the ball, hold yourself back, then go late and try to take the ball at its highest point.

"When I go for a mark, I don't necessarily try to take the biggest mark or a screamer.

"I always just watch the ball and try to take it at its highest point. I don't take any notice of anyone around me because you can't affect what they're going to do, you can't tell them to stay put so you can jump on them."

Now 30, Burton is continuing to rack up the frequent flyer points in 2008 as evidenced by his classic hanger over Melbourne's Matthew Warnock in round eight (pictured right).

"For me, the hanger is one of the reasons you play footy," he said.

"It is exhilarating, you get a big buzz out of it. You can hear the crowd noise when you go up and, if you take it, it gets even louder.

"But it's not just from an individual point of view. When you see guys take hangers, it lifts the whole side. That's a good feeling to be able to lift your side." ■



PART 3 OF A SERIES ON HOW TO PLAY THE GAME – OVERHEAD MARKING

This is one of the most spectacular features of Australian Football. It takes great skill and athleticism to launch yourself in the air, but a player who takes a consistent high mark can inspire teammates and bring other players into the game.

MAIN TEACHING POINTS

- 1 Line body up with the flight of the ball. Keep eyes on the ball.
- 2 Jump off one foot and swing the other knee up to gain maximum height and protect yourself.
- 3 Eyes are kept on the ball; fingers are outstretched and thumbs almost together.

- 4 The ball is met slightly in front of the head with arms extended. It is firmly gripped in the fingers.

THE GRIP

Ensure the fingers are outstretched and the thumbs almost together.

GENERAL COACHING HINTS

The ball should be pulled down quickly on to the chest when marking in front of an opponent. When the ball is wet, the hands are brought close together; the fingers tap the ball down where it is gathered on the chest.

1 Burton runs in to bring his body in direct line with the flight of the ball. His eyes are focused firmly on the ball and he has jumped powerfully off his take-off (left) leg to launch himself towards the ball.

2 On making contact with his opponent with his legs, Burton is extending them to push his body upwards to gain extra height. He is moving into perfect position to take the ball as high as he can.

3 With his eyes still firmly focused on the ball and head still, he has brought his hands together in the classical "W" position with thumbs almost touching and fingers outstretched. His arms are extended towards the ball.

4 He has taken the ball slightly in front of his face with arms extended and has flexed slightly at the elbows to absorb the force of the ball, as it is firmly gripped with the fingers. He has started to pull the ball down to his chest.

• Technical advice in this series courtesy of the AFL Development Department.



MOVEMENT AT THE STOPPAGES

Split-second decisions that can determine the outcome of a contest are made at every stoppage. **By Peter Ryan.**

Winning stoppages is crucial. At each stoppage, teams are trying to execute a pre-arranged and well-drilled plan.

The ideal is for the ruckman to hit the ball to a teammate who is on the move either in the direction of goal or moving away from goal into space. Some teams use a theoretical clock face to quickly communicate where they want the ball to be hit. Unless one ruckman is dominating, teams cover all bases at stoppages, employing a go-to person, a blocker and a sweeper at centre square stoppages (see definitions in box).

Teams must hedge their bets between defence and attack because a quick, clean clearance to the opposition will inevitably end in a scoring opportunity.

Collingwood assistant coach Guy McKenna was in charge of stoppages for the Dream Team during the Hall of Fame Tribute Match. He concedes the decisions made at stoppages are

sometimes football's equivalent of Russian roulette. "It's totally a judgement call," he says.

The best midfield combinations have a balance of ball hunters, man hunters and space hunters.

Good players can fulfil several roles, happy to pick up a man but then roll off them into space if their teammate wins the ball. They can also tighten up if the opposition wins it.

As soon as the ball is bounced, each player at the stoppage has a split-second decision to make. Do I try to win possession? Do I peel off into space? Do I play tight and stay on my man?

"That's how stoppage players live their life," McKenna says. "If you can hold the ball up or slow the ball down, it doesn't matter where your opponent is, but if you make that call to affect the contest and get in there and lose the ball or lose position and the opposition get it, then your man is going to bite you on the backside by heading back or running forward to hurt you at that stoppage." ■

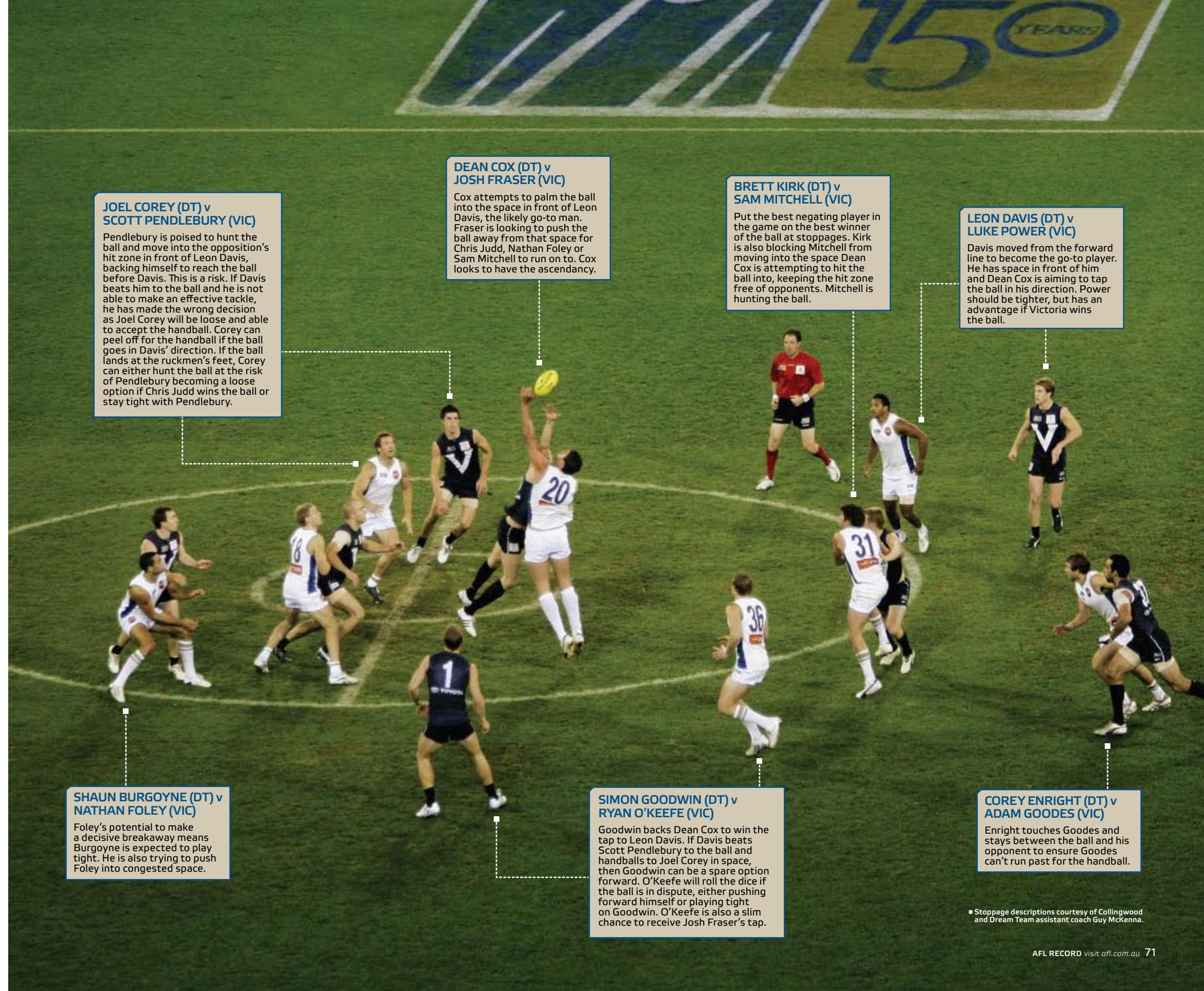
PART 4 OF A SERIES ON HOW TO PLAY THE GAME – STOPPAGES

BASIC ROLES AT STOPPAGES

GO-TO PLAYER: Attacking player looking to receive the ball from the ruckman or quickly adopt a defensive role if the ball goes the opposition's way.

SWEeper: Like a goalkeeper, is the last line of defence if an opponent receives the ball. Has to force the opposition to at least kick the ball under pressure so the backline can impact the next contest.

BLOCKER: Either protects the space for the go-to player to receive the ball or blocks opponents from moving into the hit zone.



JOEL COREY (DT) v SCOTT PENDLEBURY (VIC)

Pendlebury is poised to hunt the ball and move into the opposition's hit zone in front of Leon Davis, backing himself to reach the ball before Davis. This is a risk. If Davis beats him to the ball and he is not able to make an effective tackle, he has made the wrong decision as Joel Corey will be loose and able to accept the handball. Corey can peel off for the handball if the ball goes in Davis' direction. If the ball lands at the ruckmen's feet, Corey can either hunt the ball at the risk of Pendlebury becoming a loose option if Chris Judd wins the ball or stay tight with Pendlebury.

DEAN COX (DT) v JOSH FRASER (VIC)

Cox attempts to palm the ball into the space in front of Leon Davis, the likely go-to man. Fraser is looking to push the ball away from that space for Chris Judd, Nathan Foley or Sam Mitchell to run on to. Cox looks to have the ascendancy.

BRETT KIRK (DT) v SAM MITCHELL (VIC)

Put the best negating player in the game on the best winner of the ball at stoppages. Kirk is also blocking Mitchell from moving into the space Dean Cox is attempting to hit the ball into, keeping the hit zone free of opponents. Mitchell is hunting the ball.

LEON DAVIS (DT) v LUKE POWER (VIC)

Davis moved from the forward line to become the go-to player. He has space in front of him and Dean Cox is aiming to tap the ball in his direction. Power should be tighter, but has an advantage if Victoria wins the ball.

SHAUN BURGOYNE (DT) v NATHAN FOLEY (VIC)

Foley's potential to make a decisive breakaway means Burgoyne is expected to play tight. He is also trying to push Foley into congested space.

SIMON GOODWIN (DT) v RYAN O'KEEFE (VIC)

Goodwin backs Dean Cox to win the tap to Leon Davis. If Davis beats Scott Pendlebury to the ball and handballs to Joel Corey in space, then Goodwin can be a spare option forward. O'Keefe will roll the dice if the ball is in dispute, either pushing forward himself or playing tight on Goodwin. O'Keefe is also a slim chance to receive Josh Fraser's tap.

COREY ENRIGHT (DT) v ADAM GOODES (VIC)

Enright touches Goodes and stays between the ball and his opponent to ensure Goodes can't run past for the handball.

● Stoppage descriptions courtesy of Collingwood and Dream Team assistant coach Guy McKenna.



HOW TO PLAY

TAPPING IN TO RUCKWORK

In the fifth of a series, star West Coast Eagle Dean Cox discusses the finer points of ruck play. **By Howard Kotton.**

As Dean Cox prepares for a ruck contest at stoppages and boundary throw-ins, the star West Coast Eagle's major priority is to be in front of his opponent.

Cox says that taking the front position gives him more control over where to direct his hit-out. But his strategy at centre bounces can vary, depending on the tactics employed by the opposition.

"Being in front makes it a lot more difficult for the opposition ruckman to get a clean hit on the football," he said. "In the centre, it varies. You might have some players who might jump early or might come from different angles.

"It helps to mix it up with a different run-up or angle, so you don't become so predictable."

The triple All-Australian ruckman spends plenty of time during the week at training working on set-ups with his midfielders. He prefers to palm the ball to a running teammate

rather than hit it in an open space, which provides a greater risk of turning it over.

Cox is rarely flustered on the field, but is not happy when his hit-out is sharked by the opposing midfielders.

"I get stuck into my midfielders, just like they would do if I'm not getting my hands on the football," he said. "My role is to tap it to a certain area and their role is to get there."

As a young ruckman, Cox picked up plenty of tips from former teammate Michael Gardiner, as well as other experienced ruckmen including Matthew Primus, Steven King and Luke Darcy.

"I suppose I wasn't as strong as them and I tried to learn from a very young age the way they got in the best body position," Cox, 26, said.

"Once my strength came, I'd get in the right position and be able to tap it down to our midfield." ■



PART 5 OF A SERIES ON HOW TO PLAY THE GAME – RUCK

BASIC ROLES

The role of the ruckman is a crucial one in Australian Football. A good ruckman sets up play from a variety of contests such as the centre bounce or boundary throw-in. To create opportunities for his smaller, running players, it is important that a ruckman has the skill to direct the ball to his teammates' best advantage. It is worth watching top-class ruckmen such as the West Coast Eagles' Dean Cox and Port Adelaide's Brendon Lade to see how they use their various skills.

1 THE LEAP

Cox leaps towards the ball from one foot and swings both arms up to gain height. He watches the ball and prepares to palm it with his right hand to the space in front of his receiver. His body is turned side-on to his opponent for protection.

2 PERFECT TIMING

He times his leap to reach maximum height at the point where he will contact the ball. His palming arm is straight and his fingers are spread to get maximum control of the ball on contact. His eyes are focused on the ball and his left arm moves in a natural balancing action.

3 DIRECTION

He hits the ball with his open hand and firm fingers. The ball is directed towards the target and he follows through with his arm in the direction of the tap. By leaping to meet the ball at his maximum height, he beats his opponent to the ball and taps it cleanly before contact has occurred.

4 THE BLOCK

He follows through towards his target and contact by his opponent has no effect on the direction of the ball. He is in a good position to block his opponent from further involvement in the play and to take possession himself if the ball goes to ground.

● Technical advice in this series courtesy of the AFL Development Department.