



**I We'll miss ya, Swanny:** A retiring Magpie gets a farewell peck from two of his biggest fans.



# END OF THE UNBELIEVABLE RIDE

**The decision to retire is never easy but the trick, according to many, is to depart without regrets.**

**I**n most jobs we can happily expect to down tools once we enter our sixth or seventh decade, enabling plenty of time to make plans for our post-working lives.

For AFL players, retirement can often catch them unawares and leave them unprepared. Matthew Connell, a dual premiership player and club champion for Adelaide, who retired in 2000 says, "It is daunting. You're wrapped up in a bubble. It's almost a cocoon-like existence. It's not until

you stop and step outside that bubble, you realise it's a big wide world out there and there's other stresses and pressures."

With most players joining AFL clubs as teenagers, Connell adds, "You have a lot of people doing a lot for you. Once it stops, it stops very quickly and you've got to do everything for yourself, and some players really struggle with that. It's something you've known for so long and invested so much time and energy into and exhausted all your energies into over such a long time, when it does stop it's very sudden."

Connell believes many players give retirement too little thought, but is glad he did.

"It does take a little while to adjust and I was able to do it seamlessly," he said. He moved back to the west at age 28 and played a season in the WAFL before travelling and working abroad with the freedom to explore things he was unable to do during football, like snowboarding in Canada.

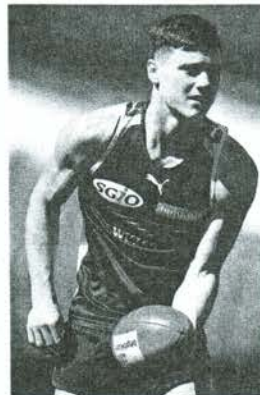
The average age of the 23 retirees in 2016 is 29, and comprises a mixed bag of experience, from those who managed 11 seasons to players who never had the chance to run out for a single game. The reasons for retirement mostly relate to recurring injuries and the struggle to maintain fitness, but also include a career-ending concussion, mental health issues and a return to the NRL.

in his enforced retirement. In his capacity as a sports and exercise physician, and Collingwood club doctor, Chris Bradshaw detects injuries, creates treatment plans and at times witnesses players' dreams evaporate as they digest his sometimes soul-destroying diagnoses.

Advising players to discontinue football because it may exacerbate health issues in the future doesn't happen regularly, he says, but it does occur.

"Often there's been a lot of discussion along the way so it's not just a quick, 'by the way I don't think you should play footy anymore,'" he said. Previously employed at Melbourne, Richmond and Geelong, Dr Bradshaw recalls a meeting with a 2007 and 2009 premiership player who struggled through the 2010 season with a knee injury.

"It was devastating for him because



**Cavka:** Foot injury ended his career.

The youngest, at 19, Damien Cavka (West Coast) was forced to hang up his boots prior to the start of the season, due to an inherited foot condition.

Then 22-year-old Lion Justin Clarke's decision to retire was also taken out of his hands when his forehead collided with a teammate's knee during a pre-season training session, resulting in a severe concussion.

Doctors stressed he could not play football, or engage in any type of contact sport, ever again. Clarke is studying and has taken up rowing



**Clarke:** Concussion concerns.



**Connell:** Dual premiership player.



2011 was a premiership year as well, and we just had to sit down with him and tell him that we thought it was in his best interests not to play footy," Dr Bradshaw said.

He remembers another player with a severe hip injury who he believed would suffer further health problems if he continued to play.

"We just had to sit down with him, his manager, and legal people, and make sure that he understood we were OK with him playing footy, it's just that it may cause issues later on."

"Concussions are different because if there really is a chronic brain injury that's not fully resolved, they really can't play and you can't let them play."

He stresses that helmets aren't the answer and explains that it is not the impact that hurts players but the brain knocking against the inside of the skull.

Traumatic injuries such as Clarke's are rare, but AFL players do punish their bodies and the majority of this year's retirees were lucky.

Being unable to maintain optimum athleticism required at this elite level due to ongoing medical issues or

general wear and tear is the major reason for bowing out.

"I think people are very physiologically different," Dr Bradshaw said.

He believes there is no predetermined age at which AFL players should retire. "Some people are genetically predisposed to certain sorts of conditions," he said.

Unfortunately injuries have taken their toll on players like Brownlow medallists Dane Swan (Collingwood) and Adam Cooney (Western Bulldogs and Essendon).

After 250 AFL games, Cooney is enjoying not focusing on skinfolds and adhering to the strict lifestyle of abstaining from drinking during the

**'Footy's a bit of a glamorous game but there's a dark side of rehab.'**  
- Xavier Ellis



Farewell: Adam Cooney.

week and maintaining early nights, and has posted a photo on social media of a pile of junk food included in his shopping.

Swan played 258 games and has said that he is sad to be retiring after 15 years at Collingwood.

Sixteen years ago Matthew Pavlich

ran onto the field for Fremantle and as the oldest retiree this year, at 34, he pushed his body to the limit before bowing out after 353 games and 700 goals.

He says, "Given retirement was on my mind at the end of last season, there wasn't one particular moment or specific deciding factor this year that led to a decision."

"The decision to play on in 2016 was on the basis that my mind was willing to commit again to the elite lifestyle and hard choices associated with that, and my body being capable of another year of 'physical abuse'."

"Thankfully, the mind and body were able to stand up, and in relative terms deliver. I did however give retirement more thought post the Round 5 game versus Carlton ... were we about to abandon the year and play the kids?"

"I'm very glad, we as a club decided to play on, so I could both help guide the club through a very challenging year and also experience the crowd reception and performance from the team in Round 23 against the Bulldogs... that is something that I will never forget and one of the highlights of my career."

"I sit here now, a week after it all, very content, measured and ready for life post football."

While some players have said they "lost their passion" or the fire had been doused, Xavier Ellis admits if he wasn't injured he would rather not retire just yet.

At 28 his career with West Coast Eagles crumbled along with his calf muscle after playing just two games this season.

He says he retired "mainly due to the reason I didn't believe my body was capable of playing a reliable game of AFL football."

Ellis missed around 100 games due to recurring calf and Achilles injuries and says, "The pain's not too bad, I just can't run any more. It's pretty hard to get a kick in football when you can't run."

Making his debut with Hawthorn in 2007, Ellis was voted its best first-year player and less than two years later was part of a premiership side.

After that he was plagued by hip, knee and calf injuries and left the Hawks in 2013, joining West Coast.

The last two seasons saw him feature regularly in the side but after injuring his calf in early August 2016, he worried he might snap his Achilles and retirement entered his thoughts.

"You try and play as long as your body lets you, I suppose. [But] everyone's time comes to an end."

"I wanted to keep playing next year but you're not doing a service to anyone if you're always in rehab. Footy's a bit of a glamorous game but there's a dark side of rehab and I'd done about four years of it so I didn't want to spend any more time on a Saturday morning by myself in the weights room, or running around in circles."

"So it was a snap decision after I hurt myself, but I knew it was the right decision."

He says he had a few beers on that Saturday night before walking into Adam Simpson's office on the Monday and advising him he'd be leaving the game, effective immediately.

"Once you can't perform your duties, there's no point really being there and the club moves on so quickly."

He adds, "I've had 11 years of good experiences; managed to win a premiership; lost a couple, but I wouldn't change too much that's happened to me."

"Eleven years is a pretty long time."

Ellis remains upbeat and acknowledges that not everyone has the chance to play AFL at the level he enjoyed for so long.

"I think Cameron Wood (Carlton) put it succinctly when he posted on social media, '11 seasons, 3 clubs, 1 unbelievable ride!'"

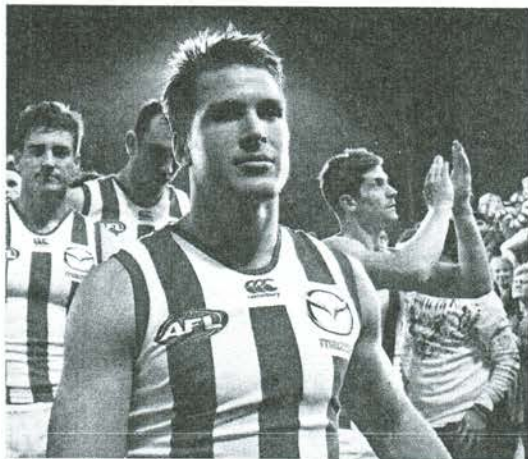


Eleven years: Cameron Wood.



Body gone: Xavier Ellis hobbles off an AFL ground for the last time.

## Era farewellled, but North optimistic about tomorrow



Swallow: "It's a sad day for the footy club."

All good things must come to an end ... and so they have at North Melbourne.

Four club champions – games record holder Brent "Boomer" Harvey, key forward Drew Petrie, defensive rock Michael Firrito and boom recruit Nick Dal Santo – have made their final appearances for the club.

"It's a sad day for the footy club knowing these four players will never run out in a Kangaroos jumper again," said captain Andrew Swallow following Saturday night's elimination final defeat at the hands of Adelaide.

"All finals losses are emotional," Swallow said. "We will soon sit down for a beer and reflect on their careers and the amazing legacy they have all left on the footy club."

All four men have been heart-and-soul players and will be missed.

"The players did appreciate the club's honesty in telling them the truth about their futures," Swallow said.

But after all the man hugs and final drinks it will be time to look to the future and the Kangaroos feel they're better placed than most experts believe.

"We look to a new era and want to introduce more youth into the team," Swallow said.

"Once we overcome the current mood surrounding the club it will be exciting with what the future holds for North Melbourne."

There is still a strong core group at North including Robbie Tarrant, Jack Ziebell, Ben Cunnington, Todd Goldstein and Sam Gibson.

"Goldy (Todd Goldstein) is relatively young for a ruckman, Jack (Ziebell) and Ben (Cunnington) are only 25 ... most of our key

positions are filled already," Swallow said.

"One of the positives of having so many injuries (this season) was we were able to blood some new players including Ryan Clarke and Corey Wagner."

Yet to debut are centre half forward Ben McKay and centre half back Sam Durkin.

Add to that Majak Daw, Ben Brown, Mason Wood, Luke McDonald, Aaron Mullet and Jed Anderson, who are among a group of players entering their prime.

"The North Melbourne Football Club has made tough calls that we need to support and stand by," Swallow said.

As outgoing North Melbourne president James Brayshaw has said, an "aggressive reset" is needed to rejuvenate the club.

- CHARLIE LAURENDI