



Clockwise from top: Ross Glendinning, Ron Alexander, Ben Cousins, Matt Priddis, Chris Judd, John Worsfold and the 1992 premiers.

RISE AND RISE OF THE EAGLES

Thirty years ago this month, a powerhouse joined the insular Victorian Football League. The rest is history, writes Tania Connolly.

On Sunday, March 29, 1987, a fledgling West Coast Eagles team lined up against Richmond its first official VFL match. Only five years later, it soared into the record books as the first non-Victorian club to win the (by then AFL) premiership.

In a brief time the club became a powerhouse, remaining in the top five teams for much of the 1990s.

However, the advent of this Western Australian competitor did not happen overnight and certainly not without dissent.

Before the inclusion of WA's composite club into the expanded competition, hordes of WA champions were lured east to pursue the holy grail of football - VFL glory.

The player drain took its toll and football crowds in Perth diminished.

Gary Stocks was a young sports journalist during the 1980s, "At that stage WA footy was in some strife," he recalls.

"A lot of the local clubs were technically insolvent, relying on transfer fees from the Victorian clubs to prop themselves up, but also paying over the odds for their own talent.

"It was a Catch 22 as they needed to pay well

to retain local talent and to stop that drain to Victoria."

In 1980, one WAFL club with foresight requested to join the VFL but was soundly rejected. Amid a growing fear of exclusion, further debate ensued and after a feasibility study, taskforce recommendations, and significant changes to the WAFL Board, another application was considered viable.

However, the decision to introduce a Western Australian club into the VFL was certainly not unanimous, either among locals or Victorians, says Stocks, now manager of the club's communications department.

"The mood in WA footy was really mixed. There was a sense of excitement about the evolution of this national team and expanded VFL competition but there was also some resentment about what it meant for the traditional WAFL."

The WAFL feared crowds would plummet while some Victorians, keen to maintain WA as a recruiting zone, also opposed the decision. Those concerns were dismissed and the VFL clubs voted 8-4 to admit the new franchise.

With the licence granted, WA had 186 days to prepare a squad to face Richmond. Recruiting began in earnest.

Stocks says surreptitious meetings were held inside pubs around Melbourne as ex-WAFL players were sounded out.

The Eagles tried unsuccessfully to secure two Hawthorn players still under contract, and were fined for poaching.

Four players did agree to head home: Phil Narkle, Dean Turner, John Annear and Ross Glendinning, who Stocks concedes was "probably the key signing".

When Glendinning left North Melbourne after 190 games to return to Perth, his career had turned full circle.

As a boy he changed in the back of his parents' car after Sunday School on the way to play junior footy.

An exceptional footballer he played 56 games at East Perth before venturing across the Nullarbor to join North Melbourne.

He won a Brownlow Medal and played in a premiership before being enticed home to captain the Eagles—and once again get changed in his car like a schoolkid.

Without clubrooms, the inaugural players were like nomads.

Paul Peos, a 19-year-old university student at the time, remembers: "The entire property of the West Coast Eagles fitted into the back of our property manager's van. Our socks, shoes—everything. We were constantly moving to whatever venue was available. I just arrived wherever I was told I had to be."

After talks with Carlton, and strongly considering a move east, Peos accepted the Eagles' pitch.

"I was one of the young players that they wanted as part of the initial squad. I was convinced, so I said 'yes!'"

He recalls original coach Ron Alexander's frustrated efforts at recruiting.

'It was a bloody great adventure!'

— ROSS GLENDINNING

"Before he could sign one player, I think there'd been some 20 that had signed to go east under different arrangements with other clubs. He felt the best players available to him in WA were well and truly getting picked over before he had a chance."

Altogether, 14 players travelled east but the Eagles tempted Chris Lewis from the clutches of Footscray and John Worsfold from Collingwood.

The 32-man squad, their guernsey, colours and song were finally revealed amid smoke machines on October 30, 1986 at a lavish launch which Stocks recalls "rivalled a Hollywood production".

He socialised with Mark Zanotti, Alex Ishchenko and Peter Davidson the next day at a Sheffield Shield cricket game and notes, "Their status within the sporting fabric of WA changed quite dramatically after that launch."

In order to promote the club, the media had carte blanche access to the players.

Stocks covered the pre-season camp at Clontarf, interviewed players in the change-rooms after games, toured with them on interstate trips and built lasting relationships.

He says of the lack of a stable training facility, "It was quite bizarre to have the best players in WA operating under such amateur conditions."

He clearly remembers the chaos that ensued at the Eagles' first match.

"WA footy fans weren't used to getting to the ground early. Because we didn't often have massive crowds, people would rock up 15 minutes before the ball was bounced. You'd just wander through, take your seat, relax and enjoy. I think the official attendance was 23,000 but there were many more than that. The gates had to be thrown open because the turnstiles couldn't cope with the flood of people."

Peos was the first Eagle to kick the ball in that historic home game.

"The temptation to just go and get somewhere near the ball and touch it as early as possible was my driving force. I was fortunate enough to handle the ball very early in the piece. There was a lot of ball coming down in the backline but I didn't have too much to do in the second half as the team really improved and finished off brilliantly to get our first win."

He adds, "It was loud and it was exciting. There were some guys that I used to watch on TV that were suddenly teammates, particularly Ross Glendinning, playing alongside me."

Glendinning also relished the opportunity to play in his home town and pass on his VFL experience to teammates in terms of fitness expectations and skills.

After the early practice games he breathed a little easier as he realised the Eagles were going to be competitive.

He never questioned his decision to leave a successful VFL club for the unknown entity. Instead he looks back and says, "It's a wonderful memory. There were some challenges, but we made it work. It was a bloody great adventure!"

Peos echoes that sentiment. "I feel very blessed to have been part of that exciting time."

In 1990 the VFL morphed into the AFL; stable headquarters were secured at Subiaco Oval; and Mick Malthouse signed on as coach.

Mark Neates, the Eagles' sprint coach from 1986 to 2000, is adamant that Malthouse's appointment was the game changer. "He knew the Victorian set-ups so well. The other coaches were good but he just had that intricate knowledge."

Neates believes the "uncompromising" duo of Malthouse and CEO Trevor Nisbett shaped the club, giving it focus and discipline.

The club has won three Grand Finals—1992, 1994 and 2006—produced three Brownlow medallists—Chris Judd, Ben Cousins and Matt Priddis—and an array of elite footballers.

Success requires the right personnel, on and off the field, plus a little bit of luck.

In 1987, some 1232 Eagles members cheered as those elements combined and the inaugural squad united to triumph over Richmond.

Thirty years later, will their 65,200 members be cheering as the Eagles soar to victory over North Melbourne in the 2017 season opener on March 26?