



Record breaker: Michael Tuck breaking Kevin Bartlett's games record in 1990.

What does it take to play 400 games?

The achievements of Dustin Fletcher and (soon) Brent Harvey cannot be understated.

It's been 24 years since Michael Tuck, then 38, ran onto the ground and into the record books for amassing a total of 426 AFL games, and 95 years since Harold Cumberland at the age of 43 played his 215th game for St Kilda. In 2015, Dustin Fletcher notched his 400th game and became the first player in the history of the AFL to still have a significant impact at the age of 40.

In a sport where players are exposed to extreme physical and mental demands that exact huge tolls on their bodies—fracturing bones and dreams—these men are anomalies.

Billy Brownless, who retired at 30 after 198 games for Geelong, credits the ability of Tuck, Fletcher and Kevin Bartlett to remain uninjured, and their wiry frames, as reasons for their longevity.

Once Brent Harvey reaches the 400-game milestone later in the year, Brownless is unsure anyone else will.

"It's a lot of games, a lot of footy... it's a lot of weekends to get your body up and playing," he said.

Beau Waters, who retired this year after 120 games for the West Coast Eagles, thinks it's possible.

"I can't see why not. There's the freaks of nature that come along once or twice a generation and there's nothing stopping another one rearing his head."

He adds, "I think the average is under 100 games and to be honest you have to be in awe of these guys who can front up week in, week out, physically and mentally, and still give something to the game, and still have the motivation to be as good as they are."

"As a past player I've got complete admiration for those two [current]



Durable: Dustin Fletcher.

players. It's definitely becoming harder and harder with the extended demands and the way the game is played. But I'd never say never."

Forced retirement due to injury could be attributed to the changing structure of the game.

Prior to the introduction of interchange rotations, midfielders rested in forward pockets, decreasing the risk of injury from high-speed collisions, as players become fatigued and ran at a slower pace.

Dr Hugh Seward, executive officer of the AFL Medical Officers Association and Geelong club doctor from 1982 to 2006, says, "The injuries that cause the most games to be missed are hamstring injuries, groin injuries and then anterior cruciate ligaments (ACL) of the knee."

The incidence of a season-ending ACL injury is only one per club per year, compared to about six per club of hamstring injuries, which can take up to four weeks to heal and tend to occur

when running at high speeds.

According to the latest AFL injury survey, the incidence of new injuries increased 9 per cent from 2012 to 2013 and the number of games missed due to injury in 2013 was the highest in the 22 years of record keeping.

However, recurrence of injuries has dropped by half since 1992.

Dr Seward explains the two categories of career-ending injuries are a severe head, neck or back injury, which renders a player unable to continue playing at any age but is rare, or a significant injury at the end of someone's career, as with Chris Judd, who chose not to go through a long rehabilitation to return to the game.

Dr Seward adds, "I think most players retire because they've reached a stage where their performance isn't able to match the younger opponents."

Brownless agrees, "The bigger blokes struggle a bit, so whether it's the knees or the ankles or the hips, I reckon they wear out eventually."

Teams require a cross-section of talent and although senior players may be unable to kick as far, run as fast or jump as high, Brownless believes their leadership and introducing young

players to their culture is important.

Waters adds, "When the decision makers look at a team, they look well beyond just pure capability. They look at experience and leadership and team dynamic."

"And there comes a time where the dynamic is crying out for some youthful bliss and resurgence, and then there's other times when the team is crying out for leadership and experience."

With Kane Cornes retiring at 32, citing his best performances are behind him, Jonathan Brown's doctors advising him to give it away at 32, and an ACL felling Chris Judd at 30, is age the main factor that ends a player's career?

Matt Priddis won the Brownlow at 29, Lance Franklin is at his peak at 28 and Luke Hodge is considered a courageous veteran at 31, but will age defeat them?

Brownless says, "Some are better athletes too. Buddy's certainly a better athlete than probably Luke Hodge is, that's just the fact."

He adds, "Like Dermott Breerton, Beau Waters, who else? Glenn Archer. Those sorts of blokes... they're lucky to play 200 games to be honest, because they put their bodies on the line every game, and they get a lot of body contact and eventually it catches up with you."

Despite undergoing 31 surgeries on his shoulders, elbows, knees, feet, fingers and groins, Waters disputes the "unlucky footballer" tag.

He says, "I'm a very fortunate footballer. I was blessed to play at the

AFL level. I played for 12-13 years and played over 100 games. I was a premiership player. I've been able to reach out into the community. I've still largely got my health, I've made some fantastic friendships, I was remunerated for doing something that I loved and got to work and train outdoors."

Waters believes he suffered so many injuries due to "genetics coupled with probably my propensity to go a little bit too hard at times and put myself in precarious positions."



Fortunate: Beau Waters.

"The freaks of nature come along once or twice a generation."

— Beau Waters

In retrospect, Waters says he would not have played less aggressively to ensure a few extra years at West Coast.

"I think the beauty of playing elite sport and playing a sport that you're naturally talented at and that you love is that it's instinctive."

"And it's one of those places that you can really express yourself."

"And for me, being on the field and having the approach that I had was one of the most pure expressions I could possibly have."

"And, I guess, clipping my wings or impeding that in any way probably would've taken away my love for the game and being on the field."

Waters believes that when he was drafted, West Coast was at the forefront of exercise science and rehabilitation.

The club employed the best doctors in the country to analyse data and map players' recoveries and training.

Dr Seward agrees monitoring players' performances and physical attributes can result in early detection of fatigue or injuries.

Training can then be modified and treatment received to inhibit the progress and impact of those injuries, resulting in players losing no game time and reducing injuries.

Waters jokes that one of the things he has taken from his AFL career is connections in the medical world with the surgeons who operated on him!

Although it took Brownless four years to come to terms with not playing, Waters says, "It's a good game to watch at the moment. I tune in on a weekend which is a bit different to what used to happen, but it's good to be a spectator."

In Round 17, there's every chance he will be watching, and applauding, as Harvey joins the 400-game group.



Next in line: Brent Harvey is fast closing on 400 games.