

THE COACH.

The prime mover with the flat tray trailer was piled with jubilant supporters celebrating their team's dominance over the hapless Mallee Magpies. Parked behind the far end goals it had been made into a temporary bar with two 9-gallon kegs dispensing beers and Dutch courage to the eternal enemy the Bort Bullants. The ground was positioned within sight of the towering wheat silos in the distance, with the forlorn club rooms at the sunset end of the ground. The site had originally been scavenged from mallee roots and the bush which was making a strong push to return.

For the losing team, it was thankfully half-time when aching limbs and bruised egos could be soothed into shape for another go in the third quarter.

'Spud Dight have you taken up ballet? The way you are farting around with the ball on that backline it looks like it. Kick the bloody thing.' commanded coach Wally Davidson trying to cajole more effort from his group. He was the last surviving coach of the Mallee Magpies to win a premiership during the golden days in the mid-eighties when the town was bustling, and wheat sales were setting records. People came to the town to work and settle, not take photos of decorated wheat silos, buy a pie, and bugger off somewhere similar.

'You backs need to focus and back each other up' he yelled. Wally's halftime addresses were renowned for their ability to inspire and draw the last skerrick of motivation from tired unfit bodies. The seated team looked back sullen, more interested in having a bet online than listening to the coach talk up another noble loss.

'Jacko Robinson, good work down forward. Just need to slot a couple more through.' Wally encouraged.

He declined to reference Jacko's inability to kick straight, handball, or mark. What Jacko brought to the team was five Kilos of sausages barbecued after every home game as he was the local butcher and an integral part of team morale. On the wall, the fading photos of club triumphs beamed down on the group reminding them there had been a sunny past. Moth-eaten premiership pennants from the 1960s underlined the gap between then and the faltering present. Wally scanned the change rooms wondering what gem he could call on to stave off another loss. Over recent seasons, there had been numerous losses as the town slowly wilted under the march of climate change and progress. Most farms were now run single-handedly with the advent of recent technology and buyouts to foreign companies.

Wally ignored Vice-Captain Joffa Williams relaxing and having a smoke, happy he was now back home after a stint in Langi Kal Kal prison for driving charges and mustering his stock through the bank manager's front garden. A token gesture of defiance for mortgage foreclosures across the district.

'We need to put some work into their number four. He is hurting us around the packs.' implored Wally looking at captain Nipper Davies. 'How many does he have now?'

'Lazy five goals,' replied Nipper, 'Has to be stopped by fair means or foul.' He was prepared to take on the task with relish as number four was the local copper from a neighbouring district who was too enthusiastic in upholding speeding infringements for the wheat trucks driving through. In Nipper's world, he would be performing a community service if he incapacitated the copper for a week or two. Or three.

Wally would have to dig deep into his treasure trove of inspirational speeches to get the group back on track. He chose an old chestnut that was part of club folklore on how it inspired them to come from behind in the final quarter to win their last flag. Four goals down and kicking into the wind the Mighty Mallee prevailed. What was never mentioned was the contaminated water from the visitor's rainwater tank that had been the home of a dead possum. Ten opposition players had come down with food poisoning halfway through the third quarter.

'Look at me I want to see your eyes. How can you look yourself in the mirror if you don't commit everything you have to give and more? Ask yourself what can I do for my team. My Club. My Town.'

Red-faced and in a zone of oratory nirvana he was interrupted by Sheryl Watley who ran the canteen.

'We have run out of footy franks. Do you think Jacko can nip down to his shop and bring back a couple of kilos?'

Wally Davidson, aware of the financial difficulties facing the club and how revenue from the canteen kept beer prices down post-match never faltered in making this decision, pointing at the under-seventeen player on the bench.

'Yeah OK! Young Billy Renshaw here can play full forward until Jacko comes back.'

With that, the group jumped up and shouted enthusiastic pledges of commitment that would last until the first goal was scored against them.

‘Come on Maul them Mallee.’ They collectively shouted as they jogged onto the oval surrounded by tooting cars and sheep grazing in distant paddocks. Fullback Dicko Richards trailed behind as he finished the remnants of his halftime pie.

Wally clapped his motley team on with a sense of admiration, proud of how they managed to hang together at the Club and back on their farms. He knew the Club was important to the town for keeping people connected and holding on together. Wally had arrived in town in the mid-seventies to play football as a gun recruit from the city. He married the club president’s daughter after getting her pregnant celebrating a big win with a romantic tryst out at the now-dry weir. Investing in the town, he bought the local Newsagency and started another life. A different world from his background of absent fathers and low horizons.

The third quarter started like the second with the Mallee Magpies making hard work of the most basic of skills.

‘Lift Spud lift!’ he yelled to his centre half back. Then, turning to Plod the team runner.

‘Hasn’t been the same since he came back from a trip to Thailand last year. Dow-eyed and bloody lovesick.’

Number four from the opposing side was streaming down a wing eye on the ball. From out of the corner of his eye the tattooed shoulder of Nipper Davies caught his attention and his right rib cage as he doubled up to awake on a stretcher in the change rooms blurry-eyed and in pain. Back on the field, the ball spilled into space on Mallee’s forward line when a skinny young arm picked it up, turned left then right, and kicked it through the goals.

‘What the bloody Hell was that?’ yelled Wally.

‘Young Billy.’ replied Plod.

The ball was taken back to the centre and miracles of miracles were sent to the forward line again where a flying young Billy Renshaw rose above the pack like Icarus and took a mark. Another kick another goal.

‘Where has he been hiding?’ asked Wally patting his beer gut.

‘New to the district. His dad played for Sturt in Adelaide.’ replied Plod.

Running into the three-quarter time huddle the team had been energized and was only a lazy twenty-five points behind. Wally could see Jacko Robinson had returned from his task of sourcing additional Footy Franks and was itching to get back in the game. He got in first, ‘I think we are cooked here and want to save you for the big one next week against Kinglake,’ he lied.

Wally had a gut feeling they could win and had to sell it to the team.

He would have to dig deep into his bullshitting best, but he was up for the challenge.

‘Right, settle. Can I have all of you players here looking at me?’

‘Spud! Focus. Get off that phone.’ Clearing his throat, he continued.

‘Do you know what the local paper said about us? Pussies at home Pussies away. Well, we are going to prove them wrong. We have a chance to send these peanuts packing on a miserable two-hour road trip back home if we win.’ Pausing for effect he powered on,

‘This is the crew who turned off the hot water when we last played them, then served us up quiche post-match along with decaffeinated coffee. Bugger Me!’

This struck a chord with some diehard VB drinkers now up on their feet and snarling.

‘We have just found the key to our victory, maybe our season. Young Billy Renshaw has the ball on a string.’ With that, the group started to clap and cheer.

‘At all times we are going to feed that ball to young Billy. He will be our funnel to goal.’ They were all making grunting machismo noises best left in a cow shed but if it got them victory who was Wally to criticise?

Five minutes into the final quarter Wally’s plans were on track. The now mercurial Billy Renshaw had kicked another goal and hand-passed to Spud who managed to steer one through. What Spud was doing forward only reinforced he was playing stoned again. Wally was so enthralled in the game he had to decline his usual last-quarter sausage roll and tea sent over by the catering stalwart Sheryl.

‘Shit, what is young Billy running to the bench for?’

‘What’s Up? Cramp, Hammies?’ asked Wally red with excitement.

‘Nah I got to get home. The old man’s taking a load of cattle to Adelaide, and I have to go with him. Stop him falling asleep, be pissed off if I am late.’

‘Get back out there. We will organise another plan, trust me on this.’

‘You sure Wally? Dad’s got a bit of a temper.’

‘Have got it sorted’ replied Wally his worry beads working overtime.

With Billy running back through the centre the ball spilled free. He picked it up and started running forward bouncing as he went. He sidestepped two of Boort’s finest, casually putting through another. Wally was beside himself with the mighty Mallee hitting the front but had to focus on other issues of keeping young Billy’s father happy.

‘Hey Jacko, you got a minute?’

‘We need to win this game and I need your help. How would you like to go to Adelaide for the rest of the weekend?’

‘Adelaide! That’s 8 hours away.’

‘Bright lights big city, you would be doing it for the team,’ said Wally. ‘All you have to do is sit in a nice big truck sinking coldies talking to the driver.’

‘What about the missus? She will be hard to convince.’

‘Leave it to me. You are a true club man Jacko, a true club man,’ said Wally eyes back watching the game.

He was pleased the small issue of him covering Jacko’s indiscretion on a recent away game overnigher never had to be mentioned.

Spurred on by the heavy drinking of the visitor’s supporters on the back of the prime mover, cross-team banter was now taking on a different glow, becoming feral and nasty. When one of Boort’s supporters grabbed a plastic footy from a small boy and kicked it over the fence into the cemetery in anger it erupted. A horizon of dust and bodies pushing and shoving down behind the far-end goals was all Wally could see from his coach’s bench. It was enough for Sheryl in catering to throw out the ultimate insult,

‘You Boort wankers can go suck an egg,’ she yelled slamming the roller shutters down on the canteen window.

The Mighty Mallee supporters finding voice after so many weeks between success started goading the now vulnerable Boort. As the top team, they were having difficulty lowering their expectations for success. Billy marked and goaled again making the chance of a win for Boort as likely as a Green's candidate winning the next council elections. The cars circling the ground started to honk their horns with one wit hooking up some speakers and blasting Highway to Hell the club theme song across the ground. With the long shadow of the bush creeping up to the half-forward line on the sunset end, the siren signalled the end of the game. The first Mallee win in 12 weeks. Spud Dight started running around the boundary doing high fives mimicking something he had seen on TikTok. Super coach Wally Davidson embraced Billy Renshaw as though he was the Messiah or better still, AFL great Garry Ablett. They only had to win the next twelve consecutive games and they were a chance for a final's appearance in the following season, all going well. They would certainly need more sausages post-game tonight.

