

THE LION TRAINER

KEVIN 'KEVVY' ELMS

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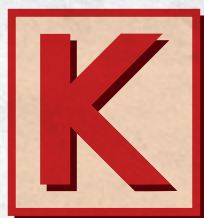
'IVAN THE TERRIBLE'

There's more to Kevin Elms than meets the eye. He was the longest-serving club trainer in League history and was, among other things, a villainous professional wrestler, a competitive weightlifter, a trainer in various sports around the world and a wharfie who knew how to handle himself.



BEN COLLINS





Kevin Elms got far more from football than he ever imagined, and the *AFL Record* got far more than we

imagined when we interviewed him.

We sought out the 82-year-old because he is believed to have been the longest-serving club trainer in League history, logging 57 consecutive years spread over three clubs: Richmond (1960-61), Fitzroy (1962-96) and the Brisbane Lions (1997-2017).

When we visit Elms at his home in Heidelberg Heights, in Melbourne's north-east, we learn that the oracle of football trainers has been, and seen, much more than the average footy trainer.

Small, stocky and cheerful, the lovable larrikin affectionately known as 'Kevvy' or 'Elmsy', greets us with a question of his own.

"Tell me, son – why would you want to interview me?" he asks. "Nuthin' special about me."

He then makes a mockery of his own words by telling rollicking yarns from an at-times tough and often eventful life.

The old brick house Elms shares with his wife Alice displays many mementoes from decades spent with Fitzroy and the Brisbane Lions.

A lounge room wall is dominated by a framed tribute to Lions great Jonathan Brown, whose inscription reads: "To Elmsy, Happy 80th mate. Thanks for all your support over the years. You're a Lions legend ..."

At a Lions function, Brown put a black Texta to work again, writing on the back of Elms's white dress shirt: "To Kev, My best mate. Love you ..."

Of Brown, Elms says: "I also looked after his father Brian (a former Fitzroy player), so young 'Brownie' and I go back a long way. Super player, super bloke and a bloody tough bugger."

Elms is a tough bugger, too. He had to be. The sixth born of 12 children in 1935 – sandwiched between the Great Depression and World War II – his family soon moved from Fitzroy to Richmond.

"It was a tough area. I knew all the gangsters and knockabouts," says Elms, who was a wharfie in the 1960s and '70s and also worked in a meatworks and as a truckie.

"I was never in trouble myself but, gee, I saw some shocking things – blokes getting bashed, blokes getting shot ..."

Elms and his brother Bill could have become victims of a notorious assassin. The hitman's father had attacked a defenceless old man and

LASTING LOYALTY: Kevin Elms with a Lions' Team of the Century guernsey.



PHOTO: ADAM TRAFFORD/AFL PHOTOS

Elms had forcefully intervened. This provoked a menacing visit from the volatile gunman, who in turn was threatened by Bill, a formidable fist-fighter.

Soon after, feared gangster Fred 'The Frog' Harrison approached Kevin Elms in a Richmond pub and advised him to be more gentle with the thuggish older man in future.

"Yes, Mr Harrison," Elms replied.

He recalls: "That was the only time we ever spoke, but whenever he saw me in the pub he'd just nod his head. He had these frightening, steel-blue eyes."

Elms only ever played football at school – "not very well, either," he admits – but from a young age he knew he had "the touch" to help athletes prepare, recover and repair.

In 1960 he became a trainer at Tigerland. He lasted only two years before being sacked by new club secretary Graeme Richmond.

This was no surprise to Elms. He and 'GR' had been rivals in amateur weightlifting championships, and Elms had always beaten the future Tigers powerbroker.

"We never got on. He couldn't take losing," Elms says.

An opportunity soon presented itself when Elms' uncle, Metropolitan

“That was my lot for the next 50-odd years!”

KEVIN ELMS ON BECOMING A TRAINER WITH THE LIONS

Fire Brigade chief Jack Patterson, arrived at Elms' house in "a flash car" with a proposal. The rotund 'Big Jack', a Fitzroy fan, asked Elms to take the Lions for weight training, which was coming into vogue.

A few weeks later, Elms filled in as a trainer when some regulars were ill.

"And that was my lot for the next 50-odd years!" Elms chortles.

Soon after joining Fitzroy, Elms's reputation as a strongman led to a stunning career change.

The *Record* had heard that Elms might have been an amateur wrestler, but he corrects us: "Pro wrestler. Yeah, for a few years back in the '60s."

Turns out he appeared on television with fearsome customers such as Killer Kowalski, Brute Bernard and Skull Murphy.

Completing this what-the-heck revelation, Elms reveals he performed as a villain named 'Ivan The Terrible', donning a red mask and heckling crowds with a Russian accent. Hence, his relative anonymity.

Unfortunately, Elms no longer has any photographs of his wrestling days, but he retains great memories.

Elms took centre stage at Melbourne's Festival Hall (where he vividly recalls taking on Hawaiian





wrestler Professor Tanaka) and at Sydney venues, along with ‘tent shows’ around the country.

“I wrestled to survive. It was hard work, but it was never boring,” he says.

There was always the danger of injury (despite the moves being choreographed), but Elms emerged relatively unscathed, aside from some fractured ribs.

His wrestling background helped his standing among the Fitzroy players.

“Some players were actually frightened of me, even though they would’ve done me over. I had ‘em bluffed,” he says.

“If a player gave me cheek, I might put his bag in the freezer. That usually gave him some manners. But he might say, ‘I’ll get that Kevvy,’ and he’d be warned, ‘Oh, don’t do that – Kevvy used to be a wrestler. He’ll body-slam you.’ But really, I wouldn’t have been able to lift them.”

Elms’s time in the squared circle also helped forge a bond with Hawthorn champion Dermott Brereton, who Elms got to know as a trainer for the Victorian team in the 1980s.

“Dermie is a mad wrestling fan and during the warm-up a few times when we played Hawthorn, he’d put me in a headlock and throw me down. Everyone thought it was fair dinkum!”

“ Nine times out of 10 I was right

**KEVIN ELMS ON
ASSESSING INJURIES**

MEMORIES: (Above right) Former Fitzroy captain Ron Alexander and Elms embrace after the club’s last game, in front of Lions legend Kevin Murray; while Elms has a special bond with Hawthorn great Dermott Brereton (above) through a mutual love of wrestling.



Fitzroy endured many hardships, but Elms did his best to lift morale.

“There was a time to be serious and a time for fun, and when it came to fun I was the worst instigator. I was a villain,” he says.

He also was exceptional at the serious stuff, and eventually plied his trade at two Olympic Games and four Australian Open tennis tournaments, and for the Australian women’s hockey team and the touring Swedish Davis Cup tennis team.

Fitzroy star John Murphy wouldn’t go to anyone else for treatment after Elms – under direction from club doctor and former Wimbledon doubles champion John Fraser – healed a thigh injury that should have sidelined him.

“I’ve just got a feel for it,” Elms explains. “I can pick injuries, even watching the telly. I had a lot of blues with physios, and nine times out of 10 I was right.”

Occasionally he got it wrong in other ways, as illustrated by a story he shares about Fitzroy superstar Bernie Quinlan.

“Bernie would get to games very early – before the seconds ran out. He’d be the first to be strapped, he’d

have a light massage and then he’d just sit there and put a ball against the wall and focus,” Elms says.

“Leon Harris upset the appcart one day by arriving before Bernie. I said, ‘What are you doing?’ Leon said he wanted to get ready. I said, ‘No, you’ve got to wait for Bernie.’ But Leon was determined to get ready, so I strapped him.

“In walks Bernie and he’s not happy. He said, ‘You know I’ve got to be first.’ He was upset all day and he hardly got a kick. Then he had his shower and just left.

“The committee told Leon: ‘For goodness sake, don’t do that again.’ I knew not to do it again, too.”

At times Elms would realign players’ attitudes, including then captain Paul Roos.

Elms and Roos have a good relationship. Noting Elms’s running gait, Roos called him ‘Shuffles’.

One training night, Roos tried to go straight to the front of the strapping queue, bypassing four under-19s who were ahead of him. Elms sent the skipper to the back of the line and Roos cuddled him and apologised to all present.

Elms served under 23 senior coaches. Only one – Robert Walls

— had a specific pre-game requirement for him.

“I had to have a Mars Bar ready for ‘Wallsy’ before a game,” Elms says. “Thankfully, I never forgot.”

During the Walls era, Elms did forget something, and he still giggles about his punishment.

After Sunday morning training sessions he was to ensure there were two dozen bottles of beer and \$100 of fish and chips on offer. One time he forgot the food, so he was dragged across the muddy oval and his car was covered in shaving cream.

Elms soon exacted revenge. He got permission from Walls to leave training early for a family birthday and, before departing, he filled the baths with cold water and clothes from the lockers. “It caused mayhem,” he says.

There were numerous larks. In the 1989 reserves Grand Final, a group of Geelong fans taunted Elms, but when Fitzroy won, after an amazing comeback, he threw a bucket of water over them. “They gave me a bucketin’, so I gave them one!”

Elms actually played a reserves game when the Lions were short in the 1970s. “With a minute to go they put me in the forward pocket. I could’ve taken a mark, but the ball bounced off my chest.”

He and Alice, now proud great-grandparents, have three offspring — Tracey, Bill and Kevin jnr, who was once a Fitzroy prospect.

Elms was so dedicated to Fitzroy that when Tracey was planning her wedding, he warned her: “Don’t get married in the footy season or I won’t be coming.”

He recalls: “They got married the same day we had a practice match, and I forgot my good socks so I had to wear my Fitzroy ones under my suit.”

Fitzroy’s demise shattered Elms.

After the club’s last game against Fremantle, a photograph was taken in the middle of Subiaco Oval of a tearful Elms embracing former Fitzroy captain Ron Alexander.

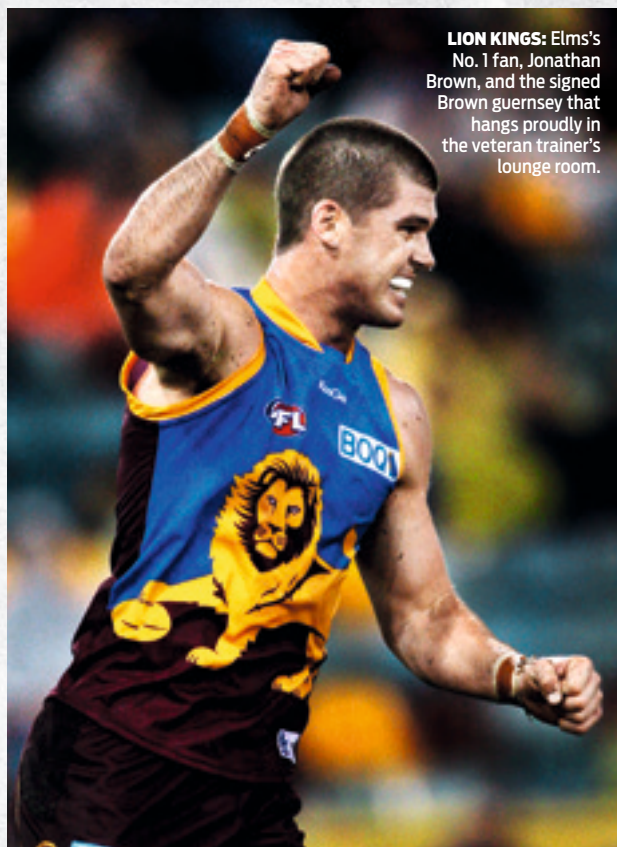
Elms almost died with his club.

“It destroyed me,” he says, his eyes moistening. “The stress of it all hurt my health. I had a bad skin cancer. I was tough and go. It slowed my recovery too.”

“I’ve never gotten over losing my club. I laid awake at night thinking about it.”

Elms had more skin cancer removed earlier this year. “I need my own trainer to keep me going,” he says.

Elms kept going as a trainer when he least expected it. When Fitzroy merged with Brisbane to



LION KINGS: Elms’s No. 1 fan, Jonathan Brown, and the signed Brown guernsey that hangs proudly in the veteran trainer’s lounge room.

“I was just so proud to be involved

KEVIN ELMS ON THE FIRST OF THREE LIONS’ FLAYS



form the Brisbane Lions, the new entity was keen to engage Fitzroy people and Elms was approached.

“The thing that swayed me was that Brisbane took on the Fitzroy song, they recognised our honour board, there was a Fitzroy look to the jumper and they took on the Lions name,” he says.

The Lions initially flew Elms to each game before deciding it was more practical for him to just work at their Melbourne games.

Son Bill also became a Lions trainer and then the driver of the team bus.

It wasn’t until Elms’s 42nd season that he finally experienced a premiership, in 2001 — the first leg of a hat-trick.

It had been a remarkable change of fortunes given that only five years earlier he’d feared for his life, let alone whether he’d return to football.

“When we won the first premiership, I kissed the ground, and I cried. I was just so proud to be involved,” Elms says.

The worst injury Elms saw was when Fitzroy’s Darryl Cox suffered a horribly dislocated collarbone (“I felt sick looking at it, so imagine how bad he felt”) and the player he deemed best at playing with pain was Brisbane star Nigel Lappin, who famously starred in the 2003 Grand Final against Collingwood with broken ribs and a punctured lung.

Before the Lions’ 2004 Grand Final loss to Port Adelaide, Elms sensed they had run their race.

“The players had nothing left — mentally or physically. You could feel it in the rooms — it was dead,” he says.

“You could feel it when you massaged their muscles. Hawthorn also found it too tough to win four in a row.”

Elms and fellow trainer Lance Upton were farewelled by the Lions earlier this year.

“I’d planned to retire when Brown did (in 2014), but I loved it too much to stop,” Elms says.

“Football makes boys better men, and it helps men enjoy the camaraderie and fellowship of each other.”

Elms still isn’t finished. For some years he has helped out local club North Heidelberg in the Northern Football League, where AFL games record-holder Brent Harvey and his brother Shane play.

“The Harvey boys call me Mr Elms. The others call me ‘The Guru,’” he says.

“I want to die at the football. Just not yet!” **R**

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