

Coleman, Noonan, Foulds, O'Donnell. It's a fair honour roll for the No.10 guernsey. Now meet the latest addition to the list. Will he wear it well?

By Emma Quayle.

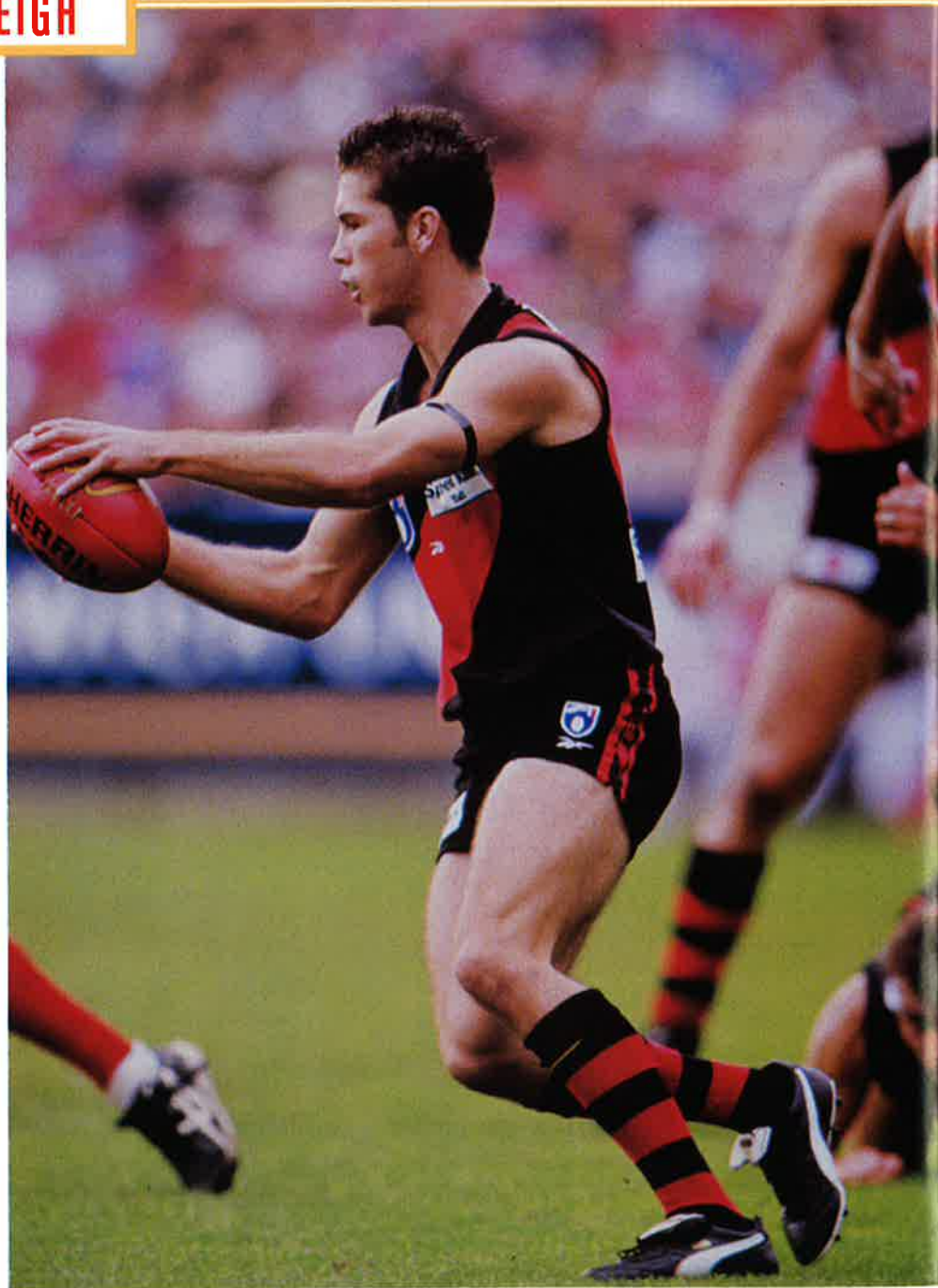
On the afternoon before his debut game of senior football, Mark McVeigh decided that he really did need to panic. He collected his parents from the airport, panicked, scrambled back to pick up some grandparents, panicked, then got stuck in traffic on his way to the ground, panicked again and made far too many phone calls to insist that he was still coming.

But it is funny, in football, how the most pressured moments of all can calm you. In the rooms before the match, trying desperately to ignore just how nervous he was, McVeigh ran into Gary O'Donnell, the man whose number 10 guernsey had been handed to McVeigh just a few days earlier.

Arriving at the Club at the end of last year, McVeigh did not know O'Donnell; he had not had the chance to understand, first hand, what the man meant to his club.

In the rooms, O'Donnell told McVeigh to not expect much straight away; to get a feel for the game and his place within it, then decide what he might be able to do. He told him, says McVeigh, that all a number did was sit upon his back, but that it was still something he could call on, and rely on, to boost his early pride.

"I don't think anyone around the Club had to tell me what Gary meant here, because you can see these things just watching tapes and watching him play, and when you overhear people talking about him," says McVeigh, whose first game, despite providing only a few rushed possessions, was as calm and composed as it could have been. "You just know that people had a lot of respect for what he did."



For Matthew Drain, the Bombers' Player Development Manager, distributing numbers is not, at all, an easy task. Numbers tend to epitomise players after a while, says Drain, and become part of their identity. Deciding who should take over a number requires both a glance back over history and a sense of where a player might end up one day.

"In the case of Gary's jumper, I think Kevin wanted to look for a young player, and a new player, someone who looked as though they could play a lot of games, just like Gary did, and be durable, and show the

same sort of work ethic that he did for such a long time," Drain explains.

"Sheeds likes to think about who is the best person to carry on a tradition. But players seem to care about them in different ways. Some of them might think it's only a number, some really want to create their own tradition, and for others it would really hold something for them. I'm sure that in Mark's case there would be something there in it for him."

But even if there is, McVeigh has already started to give the number some character of his own, simply by wearing it. After joining

Essendon via last year's National Draft, where he was the Club's first choice and ninth overall, McVeigh did well in each senior practice match during pre-season and won his first senior game without even having to wait a round.

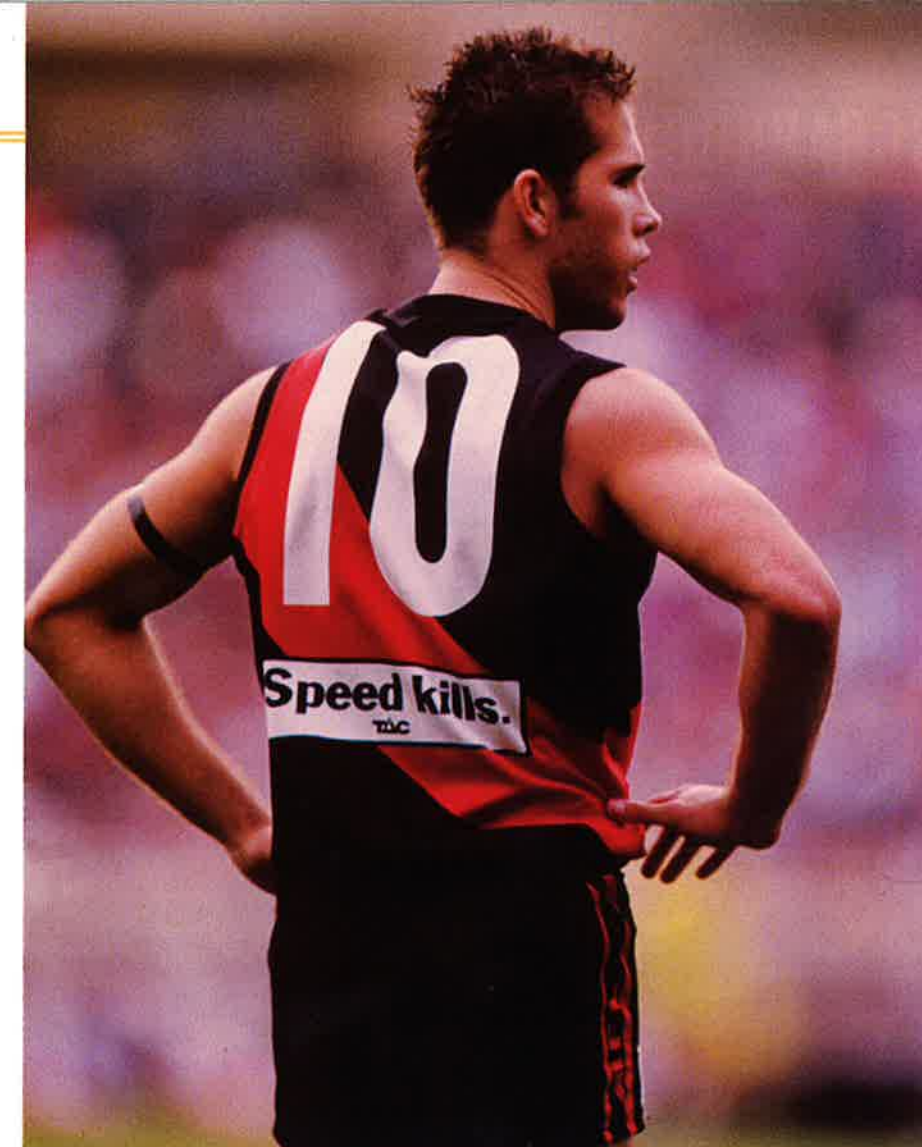
"A lot of things happen quickly when you first get here and you need some time to figure out what the system is," says McVeigh. "I played in all of the first-grade games pre-season, and I knew I was going along pretty well, but my expectations for the year were still focused on the twos for the season, just because I didn't really know what I could actually aim for, or how far I could go in my first season."

Essendon drafted McVeigh as a 17-year-old last year from the NSW/ACT Rams, the side he joined when he moved to Canberra at age 15. McVeigh was born in Melbourne but moved to the NSW central coast at two when his father, who played for Williamstown in the then VFA, accepted an Australian Rules coaching offer.

"My dad would still be the best coach I've had so far," says McVeigh, the former surf lifesaving champion who won the beach flags competition (where entrants sprint across sand and dive for a flag) at two state finals in a row. "It was probably because of him that football was always the thing I concentrated on, and made sure that I was good at."

Last year, that focus helped give McVeigh a trip to Ireland with an under-17 Australian side which met the Irish in a mixed-rules series. McVeigh was named as one of four captains for the series. And that in turn was partly responsible for his high spot in the draft pool.

"Mark McVeigh was someone we were always going to look at because of his skills, and because he was such a nice thinker, good at backing up and making the extra efforts," says Adrian Dodoro, the man who played a major role in bringing McVeigh to the Club.



"But all of the reports coming back over from Ireland really went on about how good he was at handling that leadership role and how much he enjoyed it. That's something that you're pretty lucky to see in someone so young."

Before the tour, and during his time with the Rams, McVeigh and other players spent time at the Australian Institute of Sport, undergoing extensive aerobic exercises, endurance tests and, in the Institute's famous eatery, rubbing shoulders with

names such as Michael Klim and The Oar-some Foursome.

The AIS was an experience that made McVeigh tough enough to make the move to Melbourne. In a time where playing lists are shrinking, and clubs face less control over their developing players, those who don't take too long to settle in at a club, and cope with senior stresses, will always be sought.

"It is an issue now, even with the younger players," says Drain, "and I think that we are in a position where we do need to fast-track them a little bit more than we used to. But you never know with recruits. Even though you know they could be good, you have to hope that they can get out there, and that even if they only play three senior games, and sit on the bench for most of that time, they do make a contribution in the time they get."

"I think it's the people you have around you, and how quickly they let you get to know them, that are important too," adds McVeigh, still deciding where he now needs to go in his debut season. "When you have people around you like James Hird and Darren Bewick, who have been here so long, and even someone like Gary O'Donnell in a way, I think they push you along and make you want to follow in their footsteps a bit."

And create, along the way, a little bit of history on your own. **B**



Mark of Distinction