

Mr Reliable

Essendon has come to rely heavily upon Gary O'Donnell over the past nine years – and he has never let them down. Interviewed by Tony Heselev.

When three generations of your family have played for Geelong, it is reasonable to expect that the fourth will follow suit. So by rights, Gary O'Donnell should now be regarded as one of the favorite sons of Kardinia Park rather than Windy Hill.

O'Donnell's great-grandfather, Ted Rankin, was a Geelong legend at the turn of the century. Ted's sons, Bert and Cliff, both played more than 100 games for the Cats and were Club captains. Gary's father Graeme also

played a few games for Geelong in the 1960s, before crossing to North.

So why isn't Gary O'Donnell now turning out in the blue and white hoops of Geelong every weekend? The reason, as is often the case, is fate. In 1972, Graeme was transferred in his job from Geelong to the Essendon-zoned Ringwood, and he moved his young family with him. The rest, as they say, is history.

Ringwood proved a fertile breeding ground for Essendon, and Gary eventually joined a long list of Bombers to be plucked from the area, including Paul Van Der Haar, Paul Salmon, Robin Close and Kevin Walsh.

O'Donnell, who arrived at the club in 1984, spent most of his first season in the Under 19s and played 67 games with the Reserves over the next three years. (Twice, in the rooms

before the game, as a member of the Reserves' 21, he was told he was not needed that day).

Ironically, it was another former Ringwood boy, Neil Clarke, who was largely responsible for keeping Gary out of the senior team for so long. There were times when he had doubts about his future, but encouragement came from sources including Bryan Wood, then reserves' coach Kevin Morris and Clarke himself.

In the end it was not until the last match of 1987 that O'Donnell finally got his chance. And that was only in the second half, when he replaced the injured Van der Haar.

"I was pretty raw when I got to the club and I was a long way away from senior footy," O'Donnell said. "Even so, I thought I was ready about 20 games earlier. But I had a great grounding in the Seconds. I was able to train with the senior side in 1984 and 1985.

"Then I was put on the opposition's best on-baller each week and that improved my game. So when they finally picked me, even though I knew I still had a lot to learn, I had confidence that I was ready. And I haven't been back in the Twos."

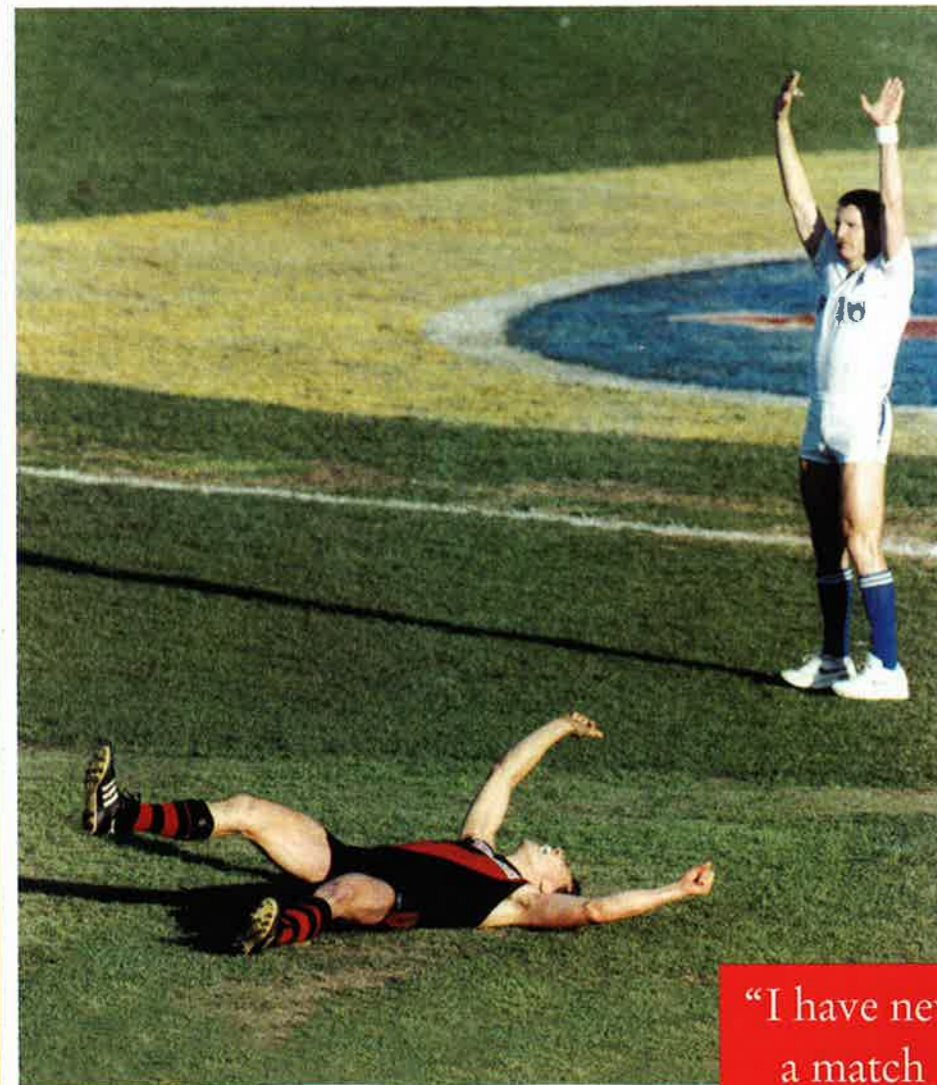
O'Donnell well remembers his first match, which Collingwood won by five points. His assignment was to pick up Peter Daicos – a big ask of a first-gamer. But it's the sort of assignment he has been taking on ever since.

That's no surprise because O'Donnell has developed into one of Essendon's most reliable and durable players. He is not the sort of player who grabs the headlines; he just does a job for the club, week in, week out.

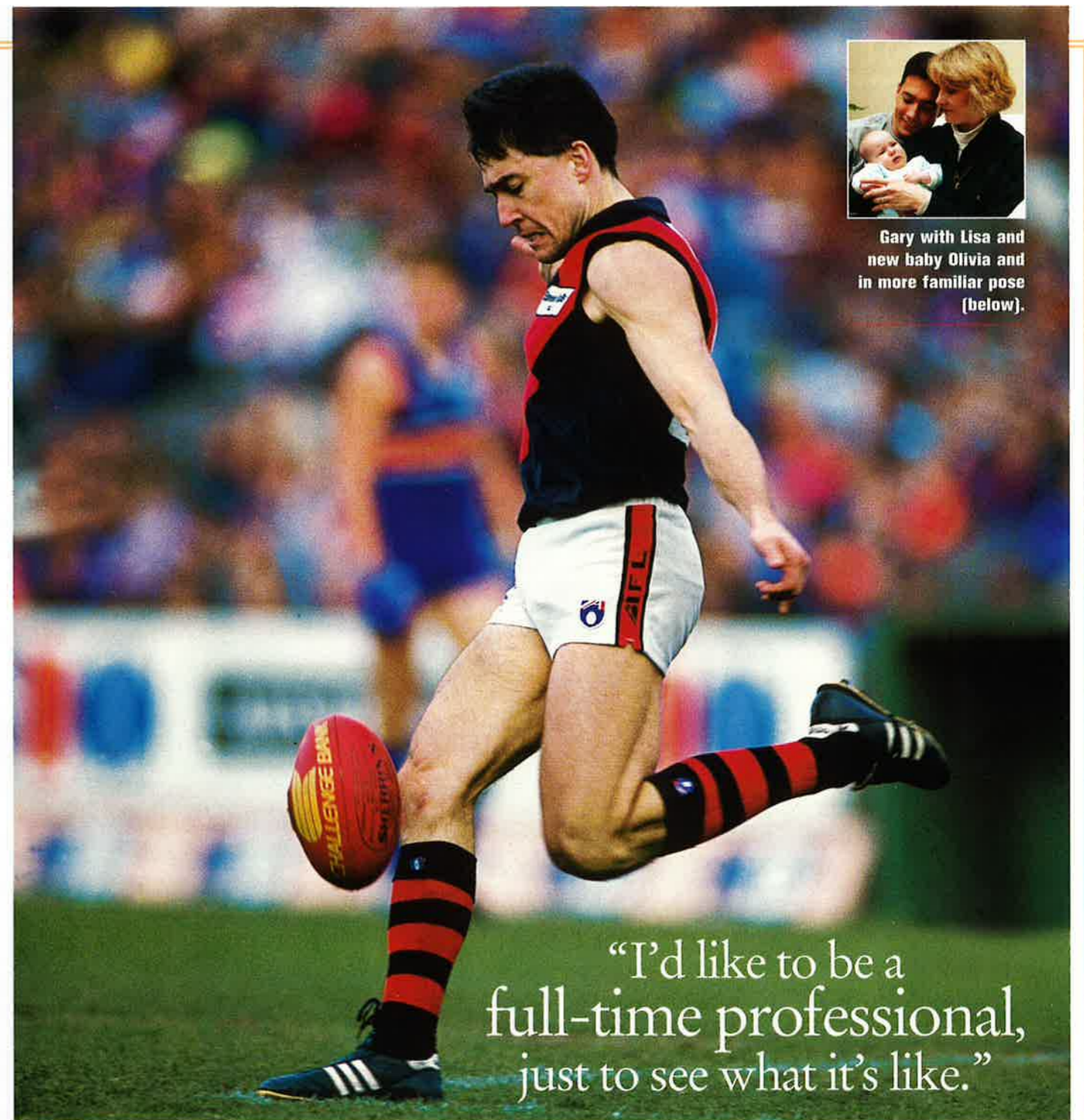
"If I had my choice, I'd like to be a 6'5" centre half-forward glamour player who could take the game by the scruff of the neck, but everyone's different and every player has different strengths and it takes a range of different players to make up a team.

"It doesn't worry me that I miss out on the headlines; I get my fair share of accolades and recognition from the coaching staff, the club hierarchy and other players."

Winning the Best and Fairest in the 1993 Premiership year is testament to the high regard in which O'Donnell is held around the club. Many pundits thought he also could have won the Norm Smith Medal that day in 1993, but



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Gary with Lisa and new baby Olivia and in more familiar pose (below).

Michael Long finished the game too well.

"I've got to admit, I switched off in the last 10 minutes that day," he said. "Without losing focus on the game, I just enjoyed seeing people drunk with emotion and the body language of my teammates. I just enjoyed myself and it's a feeling I'll never forget or regret."

In the week leading up to that big day, O'Donnell told his Commonwealth Bank colleagues that he hoped Essendon was about six goals up with 10 minutes to go so that he could "soak up" the atmosphere and joy of the win. That's exactly what happened.

"Everything clicked for us in the finals that year," he said. "Once we beat West Coast we thought we really had a chance. Perhaps that's why we started so

badly against Adelaide. But I have never felt so confident in my life about a match as I was about that Grand Final. I know Carlton got a rubbishing for their performance, but I don't think any team could have beaten us that day.

"I was invited to the 1984-85 Premiership celebrations, but I didn't go because I didn't feel part of the win. It was different in '93."

Now 30, O'Donnell is among the Club's most senior players, and captained the side in three matches last season (with wins against Carlton and Hawthorn). He attributes his development at Essendon to coach Kevin Sheedy's willingness to move players around.

"I've got to commend Sheeds on that - not only is it good for the team, it's good for the players because it gives us a chance to play in different positions," he said.

It is well documented that O'Donnell comes from a sporting family, particularly that his 27-year-old sister Shelley plays netball for Australia. That family became a little more extended early this year when Gary's wife, Lisa, gave birth to their first child, Olivia.

O'Donnell works at the Commonwealth Bank, in the Business Banking Centre, but is now considering taking a break from work next year and becoming a full-time footballer (and part-time babysitter).

"Lisa might go back to work next year and if I do decide to take a year off, that will give me more time to do things for the Club during the day and spend more time with Olivia," he said.

"I'd like to be a full-time professional, just to see what it's like. It may be good for my footy and give me another year in the game." **B**