

# Rhino Stampede!

*In the rooms at Subiaco after Essendon's magnificent win over West Coast back in May, promising young Ryan O'Connor cut a disconsolate figure. Left out of the team on the morning of the game, O'Connor could not hide his disappointment at having missed out on a memorable victory. A few weeks later he was back at the same ground receiving the Jesaulenko Medal as best player in the State of Origin match. The manner in which he has fought back from the disappointment of May says much about young Ryan O'Connor and his attitude to football — and why he is already so popular with fans. He talks to Emma Quayle.*

**How disappointing was it to miss that West Coast game?**

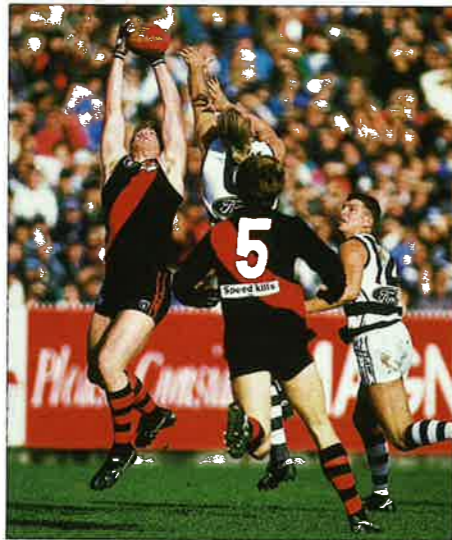
It was very disappointing, because no-one really looks at the reasons you were left out of the side — it just says 'dropped' beside your name. Plus West Coast is probably considered the best side in the competition, and I really would have liked to have played them. I suppose I would have been proving myself, individually, against the best in the competition, and to have been part of the win over there would have been great.

**Ever since that game, your form has been outstanding and consistent. Did you make a conscious decision to prove you could be a regular member of the team?**

I guess that I did learn from my experience over there, and it probably did make me want to show everyone what I could do in the next few weeks. But to be a regular player was probably a decision I made at the start of the year. I don't think I did anything much different after the West Coast game — it all just happened. Everything that happens in football seems to be a natural progression; you put in the work, you're around the club for a while and things eventually start to happen. But the West Coast game showed me that I have to play well every single week, and that if I don't give 100%, I'll never get anywhere.

**Although you played a few games last year, it's this year that you've really kicked on. What's made the difference?**

I've started to build up some experience. Before, I was probably trying a bit too hard — I'd go out and drop my bundle if anything went wrong. Now I realise that you have to attack every contest, but if one doesn't go your way, you just go on to the next one, and the one after that. I think I'm a lot more relaxed these days, too.



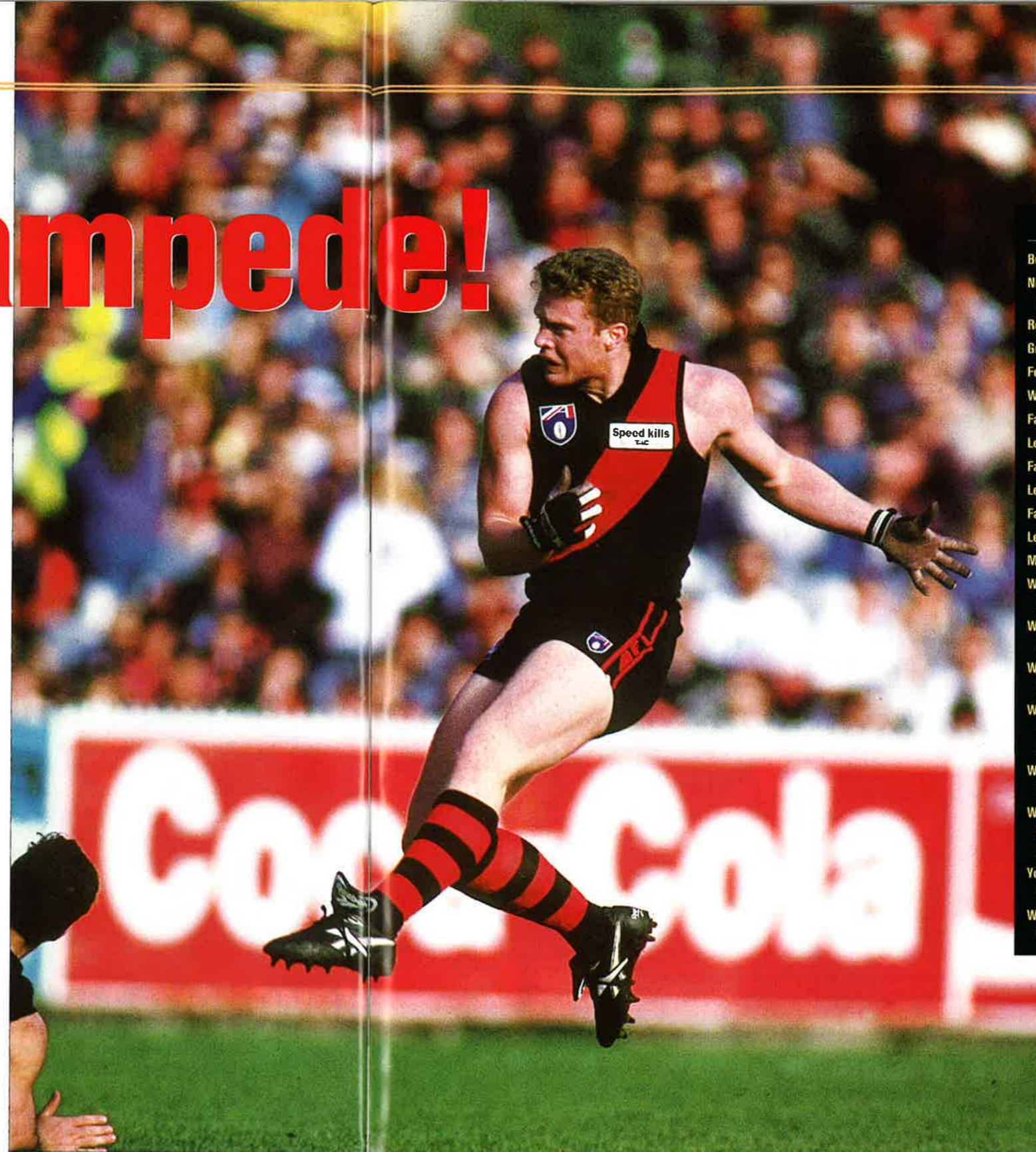
Now that I have a few games under my belt, I'm a much more confident player.

**Was there a lot of background work you had to do before you could even consider playing in the AFL?**

For sure. When I came out of Tasmania I'd never played senior football, and I was probably one of Essendon's most raw recruits ever. I think they saw some potential in me, or saw me as someone they could mould. I've done a lot of work over the past few years with David Wheadon and Danny Corcoran, and that has helped me build a solid base for myself. There comes a time, though, when things have to start happening. Hopefully, it's my time now.

**You're a very aggressive footballer, and you play with a lot of energy. Do you think this has helped you make the transition from reserves to senior football?**

Definitely. As a bigger bloke, I've got to protect the guys around me. I've tried to intimidate the opposition players and put a bit of fear into them ever since I was a kid, because it's some-



thing I feel I have to do. It's good fun, as well, and I enjoy it. I guess I'm a bit extroverted, but I don't mind — the crowd seems to like that sort of play, anyway!

**The fans have warmed to you, and the roar of 'Rhino!' can be heard when you go near the ball. Can you sense that?**

I'd like to think that people appreciate my style of play and how I have a go at everything. I think the fans can see that I'm pretty serious about my football, and maybe that I appreciate the club as much as they do.

**Are you getting recognised on the streets more?**

I am, and it's actually pretty embarrassing! I think of myself as a normal person, so I often wonder why I catch people looking at me all the time. But I guess that sort of thing just comes with the territory, and it helps the old ego a bit as well!

**On to another topic; how did it feel to be a part of the Allies side that defeated WA in the State of Origin clash?**

It was great. It all happened really quickly. To me, just getting a game, and being named

alongside players like Nathan Buckley and Michael McLean was a thrill.

**And of course you won the Alex Jesaulenko Medal as the Allies' best player. That must have been an honor.**

It was a huge honor. I thought I was very lucky to get the medal, but I was rapt anyway. I just tried to do as much as I could on the day and it obviously worked out well.

**Would you have preferred to have played in a straight Tasmanian side?**

It's tough to say. I don't even have a Tasmanian

BEHIND PLAY

**Born:** June 27, 1974 **Height:** 193cm **Weight:** 99kg  
**Nickname:** Around the club it's Rock, but when I'm playing I hear people calling me Rhino.  
**Recruited from:** Ulverstone, Tasmania  
**Guernsey number:** 41  
**Footy hero as a kid:** Simon Madden, Roger Merrett  
**Who did you barrack for?** Essendon. Who else?  
**Favorite food:** Lasagne  
**Least favorite food:** Plain stir fry  
**Favorite music:** Top 20 music  
**Least favorite music:** Rap  
**Favorite TV:** Home Improvement  
**Least favorite TV:** Talk shows  
**Most admired sportsperson:** Rob de Castella  
**What do you like most about football?** Playing in front of a big crowd, and good challenges.  
**What do you like least about training?** Probably running, but I generally enjoy training.  
**What is your ultimate sporting fantasy?** To beat Collingwood by a point in a Grand Final  
**What do you hope to achieve out of football?** I'd like to earn the respect of my peers and, of course, play in a Grand Final with Essendon.  
**Who is your least favorite sporting commentator?** Most of them — I couldn't name just one.  
**Which three League footballers would you invite to a dinner party?** Gary O'Donnell, Robert Stevenson, Sean Denham  
**Your favorite cartoon character?** The Tasmanian Devil on Bugs Bunny  
**What role would you most like to play in a movie?** The hero — like Bruce Willis in 'Die Hard'.

guernsey yet, because we didn't have any state teams when I was a junior. So during the game I really did feel like I was playing for a Tasmanian side, one that had a few extra players thrown in. It all worked out pretty well in the end. I don't know about the jumper colors, though, and the shorts were pretty ordinary!

**Speaking of footy fashion, you obviously like wearing gloves. What's the attraction?**

When I started wearing gloves, I was at a stage where I was ready to try anything. If the gloves give me one extra mark a week, or the confidence to get a few more possessions, then I'll use them.

**By the time this appears, we will hopefully be on the verge of another finals campaign. Are you looking forward to playing in September?**

For sure. To play in the finals is everybody's dream, and no-one goes through the season without thinking about them. I'd love to be a part of the team in the finals; it's such a special time of the year. **B**