

BEHIND PLAY WITH GAVIN WANGANEEN

There are few more exciting, or popular, footballers running around in the AFL at the moment than Gavin Wanganeen. The 1993 Brownlow Medallist is universally recognised as one of the game's most skilful and courageous players. But what was he like as a kid? Read on and find out ...

At what age did you play your first competitive game of football? My first game was for Croydon Primary School, aged 6.

What do you remember of that first game? I seriously can't remember much. Probably just the thrill of starting to play football.

Which junior teams did you play for? I played with Salisbury North in Adelaide's northern suburbs.

What is your earliest footy memory? Going with my mother to watch her brothers play football. They play for a country team in SA called Thevenard.

Which team did you barrack for as a kid? I barracked for Essendon and Geelong.

Who were your footy heroes back then? Tim Watson and Robert Flower.

What was the highlight of your junior career? Winning the under-14s grand final.

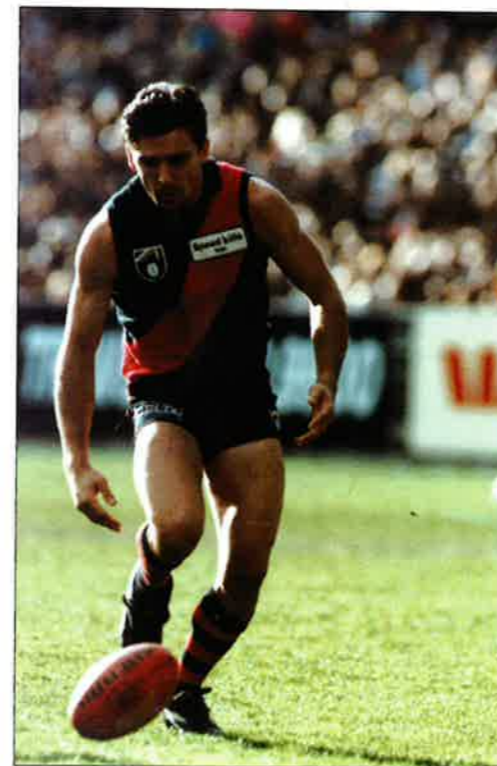
Was there a lowlight? Probably not. I had too much fun to allow a lowlight in.

When did you realise you might be good enough to play in the AFL? Probably when I was about 15 or 16. I started to really dedicate most of my time and thoughts towards AFL.

What advice would you give to kids just starting out in their footy today? Be dedicated to all your training and never give in, because things will eventually go your way.

Tips from the Top #3

Football is a game of movement. It is played at a frenetic pace, and the ability to perform skills at a high level while at top pace is vital. In this issue we get David Wheadon's tips on picking up the ball, running with it and handballing.



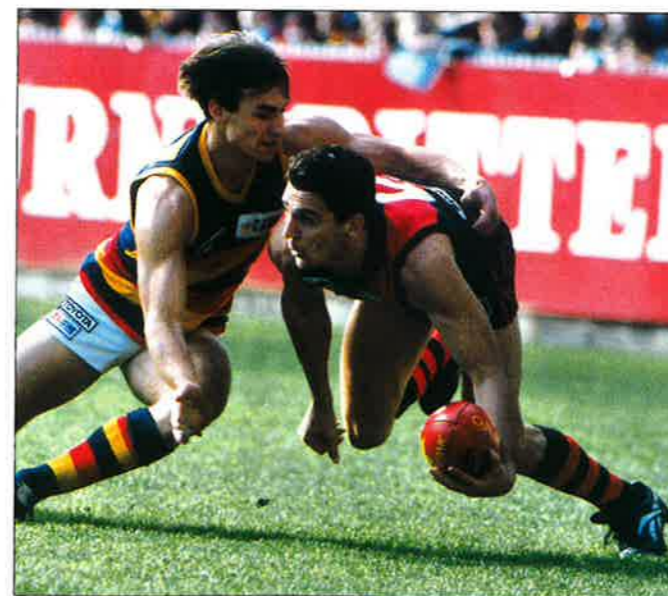
Picking Up the Ball

1. For the ball rolling towards you, get your feet either side of the path of the ball, so you can trap it like a wicketkeeper.
2. Bend from the knees, not from the hips, because you have got to go down low.
3. Try to lift the ball up from underneath the ball. Palms should be facing up. Don't grab the ball from above.
4. You don't have to pick it up in one go. If the bounce is unpredictable, tap it, control it, make it predictable, then pick it up again.
5. Slow up just before you come to the ball, so you can control it at your speed. The old view of 'run through the ball' is wrong, because if you do that and the ball is unpredictable you will just make an error.
6. For the ball rolling away from you, put your feet to one side of the ball. Again get your hands underneath, palms upwards.
7. Try to get to the side at which you've got a choice of target, so when you look up your target is there.
8. Don't run directly behind the ball, because you can get your feet hooked up and end up kicking the ball away from you. That's why a slower player like Mark Thompson is an excellent ball-handler. He doesn't fumble, because he spends time over the ball.

Running with the Ball

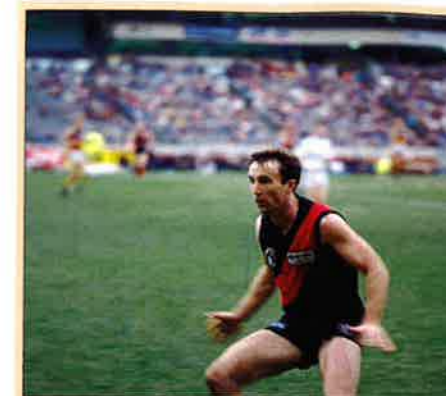
1. If you're going to run with the ball, run with it. Tuck it under your arm, don't run with it held out in a kicking position. Run with it like you're never going to let anybody get it away from you.
2. Run your whole 15 yards, don't bounce it every two or three steps. Carry the ball.
3. It doesn't matter which hand you bounce the ball with, right or left. I only concentrate on one hand (the right). If I had to bounce it left-handed I shouldn't be bouncing it.
4. Push the ball down a bit like a basketballer. Push it down and back up, so extend your arms as you run and bounce. Don't just run and drop it.

David Calthorpe and Michael Long are both excellent bouncers of the ball.



Handball

1. Don't worry too much about how the ball spins. Just as long as it comes out of your hands and your teammate can catch it, that's all that matters.
2. The new type of handball is the Adelaide handball. It has no backswing and no follow-through. You just push it away from your body. Joe Misiti is a fine handballer.



Peaking as the Season Comes to an End

Near the end of a long season, with the finals looming, many footballers' bodies are screaming for a rest. The most a club's coaching staff can do, until the last game has been played, is vary the training diet.

At Essendon, the emphasis is on what football manager Danny Corcoran calls "periodic bursts", alternating strength work with training that concentrates more on power and speed.

The periodic bursts last about six weeks; strength sessions, which mean more time in the gym working with weights, will begin in May and July.

The second half of the season is when the club looks to vary its training regime, which might mean nights in the swimming pool, or at different indoor venues. According to Corcoran, it is as much to fight off player boredom as to further condition their bodies.

Approaching the finals, the key is keeping players as fresh and as quick as possible. "Training must reflect the speed at which the game is played," Corcoran said.

Concentration is then on sharpening work, honing players' skills and working on their mental focus. "Players must believe they are peaking, believe they are strong and believe they are fast." This crucial mental edge has to come from within.

There is a risk that with the excitement of up-coming finals, players can become too enthusiastic, putting in too much work on the track or taking unnecessary risks and threatening their chances of taking part in the very thing that spurs their hyperactivity.

"You've really got to pull them back," Corcoran said. "They get too excited and start to make mistakes. There are times at training when you just need to roll over, you don't need to go flat out."

Training can often be simply a recovery session after a tough match. The important thing is to see how the players are reacting to their training drills, and adjust the focus if necessary. **B**