

# Playing Through Pain

**It is** Round 1, 2004, and Essendon is struggling to stay in the game against a pumped up Port Adelaide side. The Essendon defence is under siege and it seems only a matter of time before the dam bursts. Youngster Andrew Welsh is among the back six that is working overtime to keep the Bombers in the game.

In the heat of battle, Welsh breaks his hand. The doctors diagnose the fracture and at half-time Welsh's day seems to be over; in fact he looks likely to be out of action for at least a couple of weeks. But Welsh would hear nothing of it - he ran back out with the side after half-time and played the entire match.

To hang up the boots for the night would have been the easy option, particularly given that the under-manned Essendon looked destined to cop the mother of all hidings. Essendon's medical staff wanted him to call it a night. Welsh could easily have hit the showers and left the Essendon defence a man down - the coaching staff would not have given it a

second thought. But he simply refused. It was the kind of courage he displayed throughout 2004 that won him the Most Courageous Player award.

"Not only did he play that game, he had an operation on the hand the next week and was back the week after that. Sometimes players feeling a bit tired or sore don't want to push themselves through but that is certainly not the case with Andrew," Essendon assistant coach Dean Wallis said.

Wallis - a man whose courage was unquestioned - has taken an interest in Welsh since day one of his career, even when he was assistant coach at St Kilda.

"We had a bit of connection through a mutual friend and I spoke to Mark Harvey about him a couple of times," Wallis said. "He has a maturity beyond his years as a footballer."

"There were times when he probably didn't have to train but you could not keep him off the track. There were occasions on match day

when the doctors said he needed to come off but he refused. He never stayed on to the detriment of the side but he just knew they were things he could push through and that really impressed us and his teammates."

Essendon's semi-final clash with Geelong was another example of Welsh's courage.

"The message came up to the box that they suspected he had broken his arm in the second quarter," Wallis recalled. "I went and spoke to him at half-time and he said he just got a knock and there was nothing wrong with him. He played the whole game.

"The x-rays didn't show anything was broken but there were obviously serious concerns for the doctors to suggest it was fractured. Again he could easily have sat out the game on the bench but he didn't."

You won't hear Andrew Welsh talk about any 'extraordinary' courage he has shown - it is about actions, not words. He simply gets on with the job of playing football and it is something he has done his whole career.

But Essendon recruiting manager Adrian Dodoro says it was basically Welsh's courage and leadership that ensured he got drafted.

"As a 16-year-old he badly broke his leg and for some it would have been a career-threatening injury," Dodoro recalled. "He missed an entire season of football when he was 17 because of it. But he came back and not only played well but captained the Calder Cannons to a Premiership."

"It was his courage and leadership that we liked. When Chris Judd injured his shoulder early in the under-18 carnival that year, Andrew had to take over and he did the job brilliantly. It was his character more than anything that took our eye."

Welsh is very much a roll-the-sleeves-up-and-get-the-job-done type of player - a no frills footballer - and it might surprise some Essendon supporters to learn that he has already notched up 59 games at AFL level. It has taken him just three seasons and at age 21 he has a lot of football left in him.

As the most courageous player, he follows in the footsteps of some quality footballers - the likes of Dean Solomon, James Hird and Jason Johnson. It is esteemed company and an honour he won't have taken lightly.

In fact, Wallis says his courage reminds him of another former Essendon champion in Paul Van Der Haar, who also had an ability to play hurt but still have a significant impact on games.

Many think some of those games could be played as part of the official leadership group at the club, if not captain. If leading by example is a pre-requisite for such honours, then Welsh is well on his way.