



FOOTBALL & NETBALL 2024

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PLAYERS
REVEALED

The Guardian GANNAWARRA Times

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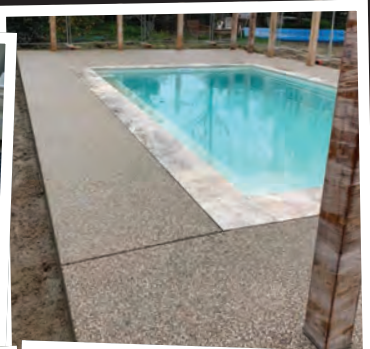
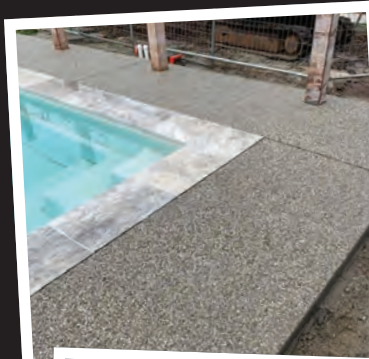
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It was excitement all around as the Swans became premiership winners. Picture: Nick Moseley



Swans flag a classic thriller

In a game that had everything from ups and downs to injuries to overtime, last year's Central Murray A Grade grand final was certainly one for the history books.

While Swan Hill have been no strangers to winning over the years, this victory was one that meant a lot to the entire team.

"We had been up and around, we'd had some heartbreaks with some losses in grand finals, played in a few preliminary finals and things like that across the journey," Swans premiership coach and player Madeleine Nalder said.

"It had been a long time coming for some of us, and some of us wondered whether we would

ever actually win one again.

"To do it was obviously amazing, but even better to be able to do it with the group of girls that we had, and I'm not just talking about the players that took to the court that day, as we had a lot of different players in our team throughout the year.

"I think I probably speak for everyone when I say it was a special one for all of us."

The 2023 premiership win was Swan Hill's 10th, but their first in nearly 10 years.

The Swans went into the match as the underdogs, taking on minor premiers Lake Boga, who had only lost one game for the entire season.

When regular time finished with the scoreboard reading 41 apiece, it was a moment of deja vu for Nalder. The Swans semi-final loss to the Magpies just a few weeks earlier came to mind.

"I was like, 'oh my god, not again' after the semi-final, where we basically lost in the last 30 seconds of the game," she said.

"I guess, looking back for me, I was the only playing coach on the court at that time in terms of Kelsey (McCoy) and Mollie (Quin), which has probably been unusual for us.

"The people we had off the court to support us were really important for us at that time, to settle the nerves, regroup, and be able to

reiterate the things that we needed to keep doing and the things that we needed to tweak.

"I feel like our bench, both officials and our bench players, really played a massive part in that overtime break heading into our last 10 minutes."

In the hot afternoon September sun, both teams had given their all in the 60 minutes of regular play, and it came down to who could best muster up their energy in overtime.

"It was just never done until it was actually done, and I think that was proven in the fact that we probably had control early in the last quarter and then Boga were able to get back into it to level it at overtime," Nalder said.



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Swans goalie Ingrid Condely was named best on court for the grand final. Picture: Nick Moseley



Shooter Zoe Morris in action against Lake Boga. Picture: Nick Moseley

“Even overtime was close until the second part of that final five minutes – it really did have it all.”

When the final whistle sounded, tears flowed from both the Magpies and the Swans – tears of heartbreak, and tears of joy.

“I even feel like I’m getting a bit teary talking about it now,” Nalder said.

“It probably wasn’t widely known, but we had some players that had been through some heartaches during our finals series, so we were carrying a lot of emotional attachment to each other.

“To know we had done it for each other and for lots of different reasons, it was really special.

“It didn’t really matter how we’d come together for 2023, it all meant a lot to us for a lot of different reasons.”

But while there was so much wrapped up in that win, Nalder didn’t think it would be productive to take that into the upcoming season.

“To be honest, I sort of feel like, from our perspective, that was last year and that was amazing, but this is a new year,” she said.

“We will be a different team, we will be playing against different competition, so what has gone on in previous years, I wouldn’t say it’s irrelevant, but it’s a new year, so we can’t dwell on past successes.”



Swans defender Mollie Quin reaches for the ball. Picture: Phoebe Doyle



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Football clubs face

THE AFL has released its updated community football concussion guidelines for 2024, with footballers from state to community level to miss three weeks' play following a concussion.

In early March, the league announced they would be adopting recommendations from the Australian Institute of Sport's Concussion and Brain Health Position Statement, in another step to protect players.

The concussion guidelines are reviewed every year, and updated accordingly by the AFL's chief medical officer, the league's medical working group and the AFL's concussion scientific committee.

Speaking last year when the AFL released their 2023 updates, current chief medical officer Dr Michael Makdissi described concussion as "an extremely important issue across our industry".

"The health and wellbeing of all players who choose to play our game, at all levels from grassroots through to the elite game, remains a priority," he said.

This season, grassroots footballers will need to sit out 21 days after sustaining a concussion, nine days longer than their elite AFL counterparts.

The variance is due to the high-level medical resources available to AFL footballers that local footballers do not have.

The AIS statement suggested that players under the age of 19 across all levels should sit out for 21 days, but it was determined that different protocol for different age groups was "impractical".

The AFL's guidelines recommended a four-stage, graded return to play: Stage 1 being "relative rest", stage 2 being recovery, Stage 3 a graded loading program, and finally an unrestricted return to play.

Screen time should be minimised and a player should only complete gentle day-to-day activities for 24 to 48 hours in the first stage before progressing to recovery.

Stage 2's timeline is a bit longer, with players to gradually build from light aerobic exercise to high-intensity aerobic exercise over three days to a week.

The individual should only progress to stage 3 if they have shown a complete recovery from all concussion symptoms and have returned to work or study.

At least one week of non-contact training is the first step of stage 3, before progressing gradually back to full-contact training.

The most common form of head injury in

football, concussion is a part of a spectrum that ranges from repetitive head trauma to severe traumatic brain injury.

Concussion symptoms can be observable or reported, and include but aren't limited to lack of balance, unusual behaviour, headache, blurred vision and nausea.

While it's characterised as a mild brain injury, concussion must be responded to with urgent medical attention, to ensure effects and symptoms do not worsen.

Whether a single concussion, repeat concussion or continued head impacts, head trauma appears to be associated with an increase in the risk of degenerative brain conditions later in life.

It's for that reason the AFL was suggesting a "cautious and considered approach" to the return to play following a concussion.

AFL general counsel Stephen Meade described the upcoming guidelines as "a significant step in the AFL's existing record of ongoing improvements to its concussion management strategy".

"We play a contact sport and there is always going to be risk, however over recent years we have continued to take action to strengthen match-day protocols," he said.

"While there are risks of injury in our sport, we will continue to act to reduce and manage those risks."

The Play AFL website includes a number of resources, available to coaches that teach ways to play the game while protecting your head and the heads of those around you.

The tech world is another avenue the AFL is looking to make the most of, as they suggest the use of the HeadCheck app that allows users to go through a concussion symptom checklist.

The recent guidelines include an assessment and referral form, in which medical or trainer staff can assess the likelihood of concussion.

For community football, medical and training staff are often on the frontline in responding to head knocks and concussion.

Through her role as a football and netball trainer, 26-year-old Swan Hill resident Milly O'pt Hoog has seen first-hand what players risk each weekend.

She described witnessing a head injury during last year's finals as sickening.

"Last year in one of the finals, a kid at the club I'm at attempted an intercept mark and just got taken out in the air," she said.

"Some ladies got footage of the incident,

With action coming from all angles, protecting players from head knocks is easier said than done.
Picture: Lucy Williams



and in that you could tell that he was out cold when he hit the ground."

The experience was an eye-opening one for O'pt Hoog, who said trainers rushed onto the field to assist the injured player.

"We have to just basically stop the whole

game," she said.

"You run out there and you start working your spinal stuff first, because you just don't even know how severe it is and then we kind of just wait till the player comes to.

"In that incident, you could tell as soon as

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up to concussion



he came to, he was barely able to speak, could barely open his eyes, his eyes would just roll back into his head.

"You're running out there as a trainer and you're thinking, 'holy crap, is this guy still alive? Will I be responding to any major trauma?'"

O'pt Hoog also wanted people to understand concussion wasn't solely a football issue.

"You don't normally get concussions in netball, but I've seen a girl who got an elbow to the head on the court," she said.

CONCUSSION

A concussion is a traumatic **brain injury** that affects your brain function.

Direct impact brain injury

Brain
Skull

Acceleration-deceleration brain injury

Brain
Skull

Blast brain injury

Brain
Skull

CONCUSSION SYMPTOMS

• Headache or a feeling of pressure in the head	• Dizziness or "seeing stars"	• Slurred speech
• Temporary loss of consciousness	• Ringing in the ears	• Delayed response to questions
• Confusion or feeling as if in a fog	• Nausea	• Appearing dazed
• Amnesia surrounding the traumatic event	• Vomiting	• Fatigue

Source Adobe Stock

"I just saw her crawling off the court. She was still conscious, luckily, but she told people she was dizzy and then just started spewing everywhere.

"I guess the two different situations were both concussions, but they can present in such different forms."

O'pt Hoog said that more people needed to openly speak about concussion, before more people's lives are impacted.

"I have heard from around other clubs where people have said 'Oh don't say the C word, don't say concussion'.

"As soon as you hear it people are like 'oh maybe he can't play for 12 days' or whatever. But we can't have that negligence. We've

got to be putting our players first.

"Whether that does mean they miss two rounds, it could mean they are not going to be more at risk of mental-health concerns or cognitive issues later in life."

O'pt Hoog would like to see mandatory pre-screening of players at local levels.

"The AFL is recommending that all players, all footballers, go through a pre-screening," she said.

"It can be a little annoying and time-consuming, but that's what the AFL recommend we should be doing.

"It's difficult for us to know if a player just wants to return to play, and how they are doing without that baseline to go off."

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3SH Central Murray Live

WITH the 2024 football season about to get under way, who better to look take an in-depth look at who's in, who's out, and who's the team to beat than the 3SH Central Murray Live commentary team.

Shane Fleming: OK guys, another season is almost upon us. We might as well start with an easy question: who's going to win the Jack Betts this year?

Glenn Stewart: What about Cohuna's new coach Jack Geary, he goes all right, from what I have heard.

Noel Watson: The interesting part when it comes to winning medals, the new players into the league tend to pick up a stack of votes, just because they're new as opposed to just being as good, so I can see where you're coming from with the Cohuna coach. But I think he might have players taking votes off him, so I went the other way and I went with Swan Hill's new coach Michael Herlihy, in a middle-of-the-range ladder position team picking up plenty of three votes.

GS: Often a Jack Betts Medallist will come from a fifth or sixth position team, because they win enough games, they get enough three and two votes to get over the line. The Mallee Eagles will be around that range, so maybe Harry Allen, he's a former winner and often polls well. At United, I rate Joel Walsh, he's a really good footballer and he'd be in my top four or five players in the league.

NW: He's a centre half-back though, not too many centre half-backs poll votes.

Matt Curran: He might move onto a half-back flank this year.

NW: He could nearly play as an onballer.

GS: I agree with you Noel, he'd make a great old fashioned ruck rover, he just controls the game. If they are to go anywhere this year, they need him playing well.

NW: Can he run all day, though?

SF: He'd be a really good burst player in the midfield, I reckon.

MC: Agree.

NW: OK, Shane, who'd you go for?

SF: I think Jydon Neagle. Umpires love him, he gets plenty of the ball, they'll win enough games and he's always a standout,

Kobe Lloyd kicks Balranald into attack during last year's grand final.

Picture: Noel Fisher



even with a team full of stars, he's still their standout player.

GS: (Ethan) Gant was great last year, but he's gone now as well so he won't be pinching votes off him. Who do you think will win it, Matt?

MC: I think Jayden Magro for Tyntynder will, Stewy. He's from Darwin, he's a star forward, will kick a heap of goals. He's going to have lots of defenders nervous this year.

SF: And Eagle is back again for Tyntynder, too.

NW: There's going to be a lot of dominant key forwards in the competition this year, isn't there? Nyah have recruited Grenfell, Tyntynder have Magro, the Eagles have Hourigan, even Josh Williams at the Saints is a gun. What about Fuller, is he still playing?

SF: Yeah, I believe he is.

NW: Well there's four or five really hard forwards to match up on. Defenders around the league are in trouble. A good key defender could win you the game this year.

SF: What impact does Wade and Moloney leaving Swan Hill have, Noel? It's going to be a totally different-looking Swan Hill, that's for sure.

NW: It will be, and the young blokes are going to need to step up a bit because Wade was the one that got them going. Moloney was a bit different because he'd been playing across half-back the last couple of years and making the play, but Wade was the engine room. So that's where some of these younger blokes have to step up. That's why I think they'll finish about fifth or sixth, because they'll win enough games against

the bottom sides to finish somewhere in the midfield. The big slider for me will be Lake Boga.

MC: Unfortunately, they've lost nearly an entire team of senior players across their seniors and reserves.

SF: They have lost 19 guys who played in their seniors last year.

MC: All their recruits, both coaches, all their experienced players have gone, too.

SF: And a lot of local guys as well, so that means a lot of their one-point players have left.

GS: I think they'll miss the finals but I don't think it's all doom and gloom for Boga either, they'll still be pretty competitive because they've picked up a couple of handy players as well. They could surprise, and apparently

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Good luck to all umpires and teams in season 2024

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Central Murray Football



Kerang will be aiming for their third-straight seniors premiership in 2024.
Picture: Noel Fisher

It's Kerang's to lose

IT'S almost unanimous – Kerang are the team to beat again.
At least that's the opinion of those in the know, with nine of the 11 Central Murray senior coaches suggesting that the Blues are the team most likely to make the grand final this season.
But while Kerang without question deserve their place at the top of the totem pole, it's expected that they won't get things all their own way, with several challengers set to emerge.
After fighting neck and neck throughout last season, Balranald would appear well-placed to go one step further.
Having gone so close to becoming a Balranald premiership coach – and emulating his father, Merv, in the process

– there's little doubt Jydon Neagle will have his side primed and ready to right the wrongs of last year. Thankfully, they won't have to wait long, with a hostile environment set to await the Blues at Greenham Park next Saturday in an opening-round grand final rematch.
It won't just be Kerang and Balranald who fancy their chances this season. However, with fellow finalists Nyah-Nyah West United and Woorinen also improving their playing lists over the off-season.
The recruitment of Brandyn Grenfell has certainly given the Demons cause for hope and excitement. He's kicked an incredible 264 goals over the past two seasons for Marong in the Loddon Valley league.
It's a similar story at Tigerland, where the

return of Arnold Kirby, Tom Langford, Josh Stone and Clayton McCartney gives the yellow-and-black army dreams of returning to their premiership years.
Speaking of returning past glories, could it be either of the Mallee Eagles or Cohuna Kangas who make the leap into the top five? Or even break their longstanding premiership droughts? Both clubs have recruited heavily under new leadership. Former Golden Square gun midfielder Jack Geary takes over as coach of the Kangas, while Harry Allen and Brent MacLeod will share the role of senior coach at Lalbert.
The other surprise packets could come from old rivals Swan Hill and Tyntynder, two clubs hoping their big-name recruits fire and push them up the ladder.

Having lost Matthew Wade and Xavier Moloney, the Swans have wasted no time finding replacements, with former AFL onballer Jimmy Toumpas joining new coach Michael Herlihy. At the Bulldogs, gun forward Jayden Magro is expected to breath new life, along with the return of favourite son Marcus Wattie.
Tooleybuc-Manangatang, Lake Boga and Koondrook-Barham find themselves at different points in each club's development, but don't expect them to be pushovers, with all three clubs set to be competitive providing they keep their best players on the park.
This season really is anyone's to win – and surely shapes as one of the most exciting in recent memory.

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Balranald



FOOTY FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1997. **GROUND:** Greenham Park. **PREMIERSHIPS:** 2 (2006, 2009). **PRESIDENT:** Tony Stead.
SENIOR COACHES: Jydon Neagle and Tom Lister. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** 2nd (Runners-up).
2023 BEST & FAIREST: Jydon Neagle. **2023 LEADING GOALKICKER:** Ben Fuller (65 goals).



Balranald midfielder Matthew Neagle will be a key player this season. Picture: Noel Fisher

AFTER going heartbreakingly close to breaking their 14-year premiership drought just six months ago, the boys from Balranald are back for another tilt at the title – and they are intent on winning it.

Having gone so close last season, there is an air of expectation around the Roos, with a similar playing list rightfully placing them as one of the teams to beat entering the new season.

One of the few players to depart is Ethan Gant, whose run and drive out of the middle will be a big loss, but except for Gant, Balranald will go in with a largely unchanged side.

It's that consistency from year to year that Balranald coach Jydon Neagle hoped would give his side that little bit of a difference, along with their new-found belief that their best football is good enough to match it with anyone.

"There are a lot of boys that were hurting after last year, some of those guys haven't been that deep into a finals series before or in some cases played finals at all, and now they know what it's all about," Neagle said.

"They all believe in themselves a little bit more now that they can do it, and we will do it, if we all commit and work together.

"Another pre-season with just our group and the unity we found after the grand final, I think we'll bond a lot more and that will help us lift our game another 10 or 20 per cent.

"We trust each other now and we know what we're capable of and hopefully we can go all the way.

"We've tweaked a few things, especially defensively, and we've also made some adjustments to the way we move the ball going forward, but that will just be to suit the players that we've brought in.

"We'll play in fairly similar way, but we've certainly made a few adjustments after identifying a couple of things over the summer."

Those players include Renmark forward Lachie Lellman, and onballers Mason Fitzgerald and Bill Parry to help cover the loss of Gant, while Glen Gillbee will also return home when his Bendigo Pioneer duties allow.

Neagle was most excited about the addition of Lellman ahead of his team's round 1 grand-final rematch with Kerang.

"Lachie is a bit of a sharp shooter and a

good finisher, he plays pretty tall for his size and he'll provide us with a good second target up forward," Neagle said.

"Mason (Fitzgerald) will add a bit of depth to our midfield having been a starting midfielder for South Mildura last season and he's going to be a great addition for us as well."

While there has been much speculation about Ben Fuller's return in recent weeks, last year's leading goalkicker looks set to pull on the boots again and anchor what looms as a very potent forward line alongside Drew Lloyd, Lellman and Neagle himself.

The other big change at the Roos this season is at the helm, Neagle this year sharing the coaching duties with the highly regarded Tom Lister.

FROM THE COACH

"I think it's going to be a much tougher competition this year, I don't see there being three or four teams dominating like last season. For us, after the way we performed last year, the aim is to play in the same way again, put our best foot forward but this time go one step further."

INS & OUTS

INS: Mason Fitzgerald (South Mildura), Lachlan Lellman (Renmark), Jack Gervasi (Ultima), Tobie Richardson (Lake Boga), Glen Gilbee, Bill Parry.

OUTS: Ethan Gant (Barossa District), Tyson Smythe (Hillston Swans), Ned Lay (Tyntynder), Josh Hodgson (injured).

KEY PLAYER

Jydon Neagle: One of, if not the best player in the Central Murray, Neagle can do things with a football that others can only dream about. Can play anywhere on the ground, with his sublime skills and attack on the ball second to none. Will be motivated by last year's grand-final loss, and as such it would not surprise if the Balranald joint coach took his game to an even higher level.

Buttsy, Camilla and Evelina
would like to wish the mighty Roos all
the best for the 2024 season

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WHAT TO EXPECT IN 2024

Having fallen just 10 points short of premiership glory last season, Balranald are widely regarded as the team to beat this year. The Roos have some of the best top-end talent in the league, such as Ben Fuller, Jordan Wilkins and the Neagle and Lloyd brothers, but if they are to take that next step, they will need to improve their depth. That improvement should come from the likes of Jack Helgeland, Jack Jones, Toby Lay and Rory Fitzgerald, who all showed plenty of positive signs for the future last season. The addition of Lachie Lellman up forward will help ease the burden on Fuller, but their defence is still a slight concern, apart from Jaxon Neagle, who is an out-and-out star. While the competition should be a lot tougher this season, anything less than a top three finish would be below par for Balranald.

BIG IMPROVER

Ian Fuller: Showed glimpses of what he was capable of last year, but the longer the season went, the better and more confident it seemed Fuller was. Will be required to step up after the loss of Ethan Gant, with his speed and ability to break the lines set to be vital to the Roos' chances of reaching another grand final.

THE BURNING QUESTION

Will last year's grand final heartbreak motivate or hamper the Roos?
The old sporting adage that "you need to lose one to win one" may or may not be true – who really knows honestly. While Balranald had every opportunity last year to break their premiership drought, only to fall agonisingly short, this year could prove to be a far harder task. Losing Ethan Gant leaves a big hole in their midfield and opposition teams have had a whole summer to pick apart the Roos' system. The one unknown is how the playing group responds to the disappointment of grand final day last year. Does it galvanise and motivate them to go one step further? Or does that pain and heartbreak still linger, as it did for Cohuna last season.



Drew Lloyd will once again pull on the blue and white stripes this season, as he and his teammates attempt to go one step further. Picture: Noel Fisher

BALRANALD'S POSSIBLE BEST 22

B:	Jack Jones	Toby Lay	Jack Salau
HB:	Ryan Middlebrook	Jaxon Neagle	Harrison Soraggi
C:	Ian Fuller	Colin Andrews	Mason Fitzgerald
HF:	Jydon Neagle	Drew Lloyd	Tom Salau
F:	Seth Connell	Ben Fuller	Lachlan Lellman
R:	Jordan Wilkins	Matthew Neagle	Kobe Lloyd
INT:	Leyland Brougham	Jack Helgeland	Bill Parry
	Jarryd Stead		

2024 FIXTURE

ROUND 1, APRIL 13

KERANG

ROUND 2, APRIL 20

LAKE BOGA (A)

ROUND 3, APRIL 27 – ANZAC

BYE

ROUND 4, MAY 4

TYNTYNDER

ROUND 5, MAY 11

KOONDROOK-BARHAM (A)

ROUND 6, MAY 18 – THANKS

WOORINEN

ROUND 7, MAY 25

TOOLEYBUC-MANANGATANG (A)

ROUND 8, JUNE 1

MALLEE EAGLES

ROUND 9, JUNE 15 – PRIDE

SWAN HILL (A)

ROUND 10, JUNE 22

NNW UNITED

ROUND 11, JUNE 29

COHUNA KANGAS (A)

ROUND 12, JULY 13 – NAIDOC

LAKE BOGA

ROUND 13, JULY 20

KERANG (A)

ROUND 14, JULY 27

KOONDROOK-BARHAM

ROUND 15, AUGUST 3 – RIBBON

TYNTYNDER (A)

ROUND 16, AUGUST 10

BYE

ROUND 17, AUGUST 17

WOORINEN (A)

ROUND 18, AUGUST 24

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Cohuna Kangas



FOOTY FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1997. **GROUND:** Cohuna Recreation Reserve. **PREMIERSHIPS:** None.
PRESIDENT: Wade Mathers. **SENIOR COACH:** Jack Geary. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** 6th.
2023 BEST & FAIREST: Joel Helman. **2023 LEADING GOALKICKER:** Rhys Free (47 goals).

Jack Donat at full stretch during the Kangas' win over Koondrook-Barham in round 12 last season.
 Picture: Nick Moseley



A NEW coach, combined with the return of several favourite sons, has the Kangas faithful hopeful of a return to finals – and potentially more.

After a bitterly disappointing 2023, where Cohuna went from grand final heartbreak to completely missing the finals, the Kangas have left no stone unturned in their pursuit of that elusive Central Murray premiership.

Jack Geary will take over the reins at the Kangas from Tyson Findlay, who returned to North Bendigo after one season in charge. Geary brings with him an impressive CV, with six premierships at Bendigo Football League powerhouse Golden Square, including last year's six-point win over Sandhurst in which he was adjudged best on ground for the third time in his career in a grand final.

Add to that the 2018 Michelson Medal as the Bendigo Football League's best-and-fairest player, and it's easy to see why the Kangas would feel bullish about their chances this season.

Joining Geary will be Ryan Semmel, a former Victoria Country representative and six-time club best-and-fairest, mid-sized defender Jayden Cordy and small forward Izaac Johnson. But the real positive is the returns of William Lee, Jackson Williams, Xavier Mitchell, Sam Leitch and Jacob Mitchell, with all five players returning to help their home club climb back up the ladder.

It's a fact that isn't lost on Geary, who despite his impressive resume, is entering his first season as a senior coach, with the Kangas having a clear focus on improving their midfield depth ahead of the new season.

"A lot of the guys we've recruited are local guys who are coming back home and are wanting to try and achieve something for their home club, which is great for the town and great for the club," Geary said.

"We've tried to recruit midfielders that can play all over the ground.

"We feel that we're pretty well stocked for key position players up forward and down back, but with the size of our home ground, we wanted guys who could cover the ground between the arcs and so far, it's looking good."

While the Kangas will go into the season bullish about the chances of playing finals, it hasn't been all smooth sailing this off season, with leading goalkicker Rhys Free departing, along with defenders Jake Hammond, Daniel

Paterson and Tom Metherell, with the latter appointed senior coach of Wedderburn.

With so many arrivals and departures, Cohuna will have a vastly different look about them on paper, with Geary also hoping his side will have a different look on the field as well.

"We want try and play a little bit on instinct, but we also need to try and find a balance between that and having a strong defensive structure," Geary said.

"One area we've identified where we need to improve is with our depth and having guys playing their roles, we need all 22 of us playing our roles and having an impact on the game, whether it be big or small.

"I'm coming in with fresh eyes and a new perspective and everyone is starting fresh with me, I haven't got anyone pigeonholed into set positions and it doesn't matter what guys have done in the past, everyone starts again with a clean slate."

FROM THE COACH

"First and foremost we want to improve, but at the same time we want to be right there at the business end of the season. I think the team we've assembled should hopefully stack up against the best, and I suppose after finishing sixth last year, anything higher than that is an improvement, but I think at our best we should be playing finals."

INS & OUTS

INS: Jack Geary (Golden Square), Izaac Johnson (Mathoura), Xavier Mitchell (Banyule), Jacob Mitchell (Banyule), Jackson Williams (Port Melbourne Colts), William Lee (Golden Square), Jayden Cordy (Huntly), Ryan Semmel (East Brighton), Sam Leitch (Port Melbourne Colts).

OUTS: Rhys Free (Noosa Tigers AFC), Tyson Findlay (North Bendigo), Tom Metherell (Wedderburn), Luke Conca (Trinity Aquinas), Jake Hammond (Blackburn), Nathan Hammond, Daniel Paterson.

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WHAT TO EXPECT IN 2024

The Kangas are once again going all out in an attempt to win that elusive silverware, but this time they've gone down the path of bringing home-grown talent back to the club. Considering the quality of players they've recruited, the Kangas should be aiming for nothing less than a finals appearance, and if they can make use of their outside run as planned, then a top-three finish shouldn't be out of the question either.

Have a dream run with the fixture as well, with NNW United the only finals team from last season they will face twice, with double-up games against Koondrook-Barham, Tooleybuc-Manangatang, Tyntynder, Swan Hill and the Mallee Eagles.

BIG IMPROVER

Dylan Johnstone: Seems unfair to put a player who has been among his team's key contributors in this column, but it's hoped the departure of Rhys Free will have a positive effect of Johnstone's game. Kicked just 19 from 14 matches last season, and although he spent some time in defence, was well down on his 2022 season, when he booted 52 majors. If the Kangas are to push deep into the finals, they will need Johnstone at his absolute best.

THE BURNING QUESTION

Who will be the bigger loss – Jake Hammond or Rhys Free? And more importantly, who will replace them?

OK, that's two questions, but in the context of the Kangas' line-up they are both big losses. Having led the Kangas' goalkicking for the past three seasons since his return, Free will be difficult to replace. His absence may however free up space for Dylan Johnstone to take over the No.1 forward mantle, and with Daniel Coates, Ryan Semmel and Izaac Johnson rolling through the forward half, the Kangas won't be short on goalkicking options.

Hammond on the other hand will be even harder to replace, as there really is nobody who can read the play like him nor take a contested mark. While Will Lee and Sam Leitch will fill the lock down defender role, the Kangas still have work to do on intercepting their opponents' forward entries.



KEY PLAYER

Joel Helman: One of the best and most dynamic players in the Central Murray, the former Jack Betts Medallist can hurt opposition teams with both his ability to win the contested ball and his clean disposal on the outside. Should find a new lease on life in the Kangas' midfield with the addition of Jack Geary, with all the attention now not focused squarely on the reigning best-and-fairest.

Midfielder and reigning club best-and-fairest Joel Helman will be a key player for the Kangas in their bid for a finals return.
Picture: Maryke de Villiers

COHUNA KANGAS' POSSIBLE BEST 22

B:	Jayden Cordy	William Lee	Cooper McLoughlan
HB:	Brenton Conforti	Sam Leitch	Jackson Williams
C:	Xavier Mitchell	Joel Helman	Jacob Mitchell
HF:	Sam Mcglone	Ryan Semmel	Jack Donat
F:	Izaac Johnson	Dylan Johnstone	Daniel Coates
R:	Christopher Anderson	Jarrood Findlay	Jack Geary
INT:	Riley Hird	Dylan Friedberger	Angus Donat
	Will Thrum		

2024 FIXTURE

ROUND 1, APRIL 13

TYNTYNDER (A)

ROUND 2, APRIL 20

KOONDROOK-BARHAM

ROUND 3, APRIL 27 – ANZAC

WOORINEN (A)

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TOOLEYBUC-MANANGATANG

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BYE

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SWAN HILL (A)

ROUND 18, AUGUST 24

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Kerang

FOOTY FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1997. **GROUND:** Riverside Park. **PREMIERSHIPS:** 10 (2004, 2010, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2022, 2023). **PRESIDENT:** Ashley Wise. **SENIOR COACH:** Troy Coates.
2023 LADDER POSITION: 1st (Premiers). **2023 BEST & FAIREST:** Rylee Smith.
2023 LEADING GOALKICKER: Bradlee Pay (38 goals).



Midfielder Josh Nitschke will be a player to watch when Kerang face off in the grand final rematch to begin the 2024 Central Murray home-and-away season. Picture: Noel Fisher

DESPITE losing eight premiership players this off-season, Kerang will still be the team to beat when the 2024 season gets under way next weekend.

With a large turnover of players, it will be a vastly different navy-blue outfit that runs onto Greenham Park next Saturday for their grand final rematch with Balranald, compare to the one that defeated the Roos by 10 points.

The biggest loss will be that of club best-and-fairest Rylee Smith, who has returned to Nullawil. The speedy onballer had established himself as one the Central Murray's premier midfielders over the past two seasons.

Michael Dalrymple, Adam Hunter, Hayden Hall and Michael Runciman have also departed for Newstead, while Troy Davis, Troy Coates, Gregor Knight and Ash Davis all hung up their boots after decorated careers.

While Coates' playing days may be over, he is staying on as senior coach.

The long-time leader was excited by the prospect of seeing the next generation of Kerang footballers get their opportunity at the senior level.

"We've been lucky to have a lot of talent come through our junior pathways over the years, but at the same time they tend to stay at our club because we give them opportunities to play at a young age," Coates said.

"We're mindful of not over-recruiting, there's always a bigger picture at play and while we've been relatively successful in recent years, we're also mindful of the need to back in our kids and it will be no different this year.

"We've lost eight of our grand final side and we've deliberately recruited only four players just so we can blood four of our local, younger players into the team and give them their opportunity.

"It's exciting for the club, and we need these kids to start coming through because we have an ageing list that will probably finish up in the next couple of seasons."

With Kerang's reserves having won last year's flag and their colts team reaching the preliminary final, there is plenty of young talent hungry for their opportunity.

But while the Blues will have a distinct focus on regenerating their list from within, they will also go into the new season as premiership favourites, having recruited well from outside the Central Murray.

Former Golden Square premiership

onballer and 2019 Michelson Medallist Adam Baird will pull on the navy blue this season and is sure to have an immediate impact for his new club, while lively half-forward and wing Brett Kennedy will also wear a Kerang guernsey for the first time.

Also set to return to the club is former premiership player Jarryd Pertzelt, who spent last season with Merrigum, while former junior Archer Dibsdale will return and help fill the void left by Michael Dalrymple and Adam Hunter up forward.

While Kerang have long been the most efficient club at moving the ball by hand and foot, with the addition of genuine speed into their line-up, Coates was hoping to add another string to his team's bow.

"If anything, I think we'll play even quicker and move the ball even faster," Coates said.

"If you look at the guys we've lost, with the exception of 'Smithy' (Rylee Smith), all of them were a little bit on the slower side.

"So, to replace them with kids that possess genuine speed, I think we'll be even quicker, and with our recruits, they're all running-type players as well."

FROM THE COACH

"I think the league, as a whole, will improve this year, but our main aim is always to make finals. We think we have a list that is capable of finishing in the top three, which is crucial to earn that second chance and give yourself the best possible chance to make the grand final.

INS & OUTS

INS: Adam Baird (Mount Pleasant), Jarryd Pertzelt (Merrigum), Brett Kennedy (Nightcliff), Archer Dibsdale (St Joseph's).

OUTS: Troy Davis (retired), Troy Coates (retired), Rylee Smith (Nullawil), Michael Dalrymple (Newstead), Adam Hunter (Newstead), Hayden Hall (Newstead), Michael Runciman (Newstead), Gregor Knight (retired), Ash Davis (retired).



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WHAT TO EXPECT IN 2024

Just like death and taxes, you can be certain that Kerang will always compile a competitive side every season. Widely regarded as being the team to beat, the Blues will kick off their season with a grand final rematch against Balranald in what is sure to be a litmus test for their new look line-up. After that Kerang's fixture opens up, with the Blues playing just two (Balranald and Woorinen) of last year's top five teams twice, with their biggest challenge likely to be a seven-game stretch without a bye heading into the finals. While the Blues' midfield will continue to be their biggest strength, they do appear light on for key-position players, especially down back. Whether opposition teams can win enough of the ball in the midfield to expose their defence will be the challenge.

KEY PLAYER

Nick Lang: Returning for his second season in Kerang colours, Lang will have to shoulder the ruck duties singlehandedly following the retirement of Troy Davis. Land looked set to take the Central Murray by storm last year, until a knee injury early in the season sidelined him for six games. Returned in round 11 and slowly returned to his best, culminating in a dominant finals series and grand final. One of the best, if not the best, tap ruckmen in the league, and is equally damaging around the ground and up forward with his contested marking ability.

BIG IMPROVER

Caleb Nitschke: Missed the majority of last season with a shoulder injury, but returned to the senior team in round 17 and five games later, became a premiership player. Despite a limited preparation, still managed to kick nine goals in five matches, including two in the grand final. With a full pre-season under his belt, Nitschke will be like a new recruit. The key forward is set to lead the Blues' front half of the ground.



THE BURNING QUESTION

How do Kerang kick a winning score?
I know it's never been a problem in the past, but with Adam Hunter, Michael Dalrymple and Michael Runciman all heading to Newstead and Troy Coates retiring, Kerang will look vastly different up forward this season. Between them, the quartet kicked 70 goals last season, and if you include midfielder

Rylee Smith's 31 goals into that tally, the Blues will need to find another 100 majors from other avenues in 2024. The return of Jarryd Pertzelt will help, with the known goal kicker returning for his second stint at Kerang, as will the return of marking forward Archer Dibsedale. Throw in full seasons from Caleb Nitschke, Brad Pay and Sam Heavyside, and the Blues should have more than enough firepower.

KERANG'S POSSIBLE BEST 22

B:	Josh Hann	Josh Hunter	Liam Jardine
HB:	Jesse Clark	Lachlan Ross	Sean Hunter
C:	Brett Kennedy	Martin Kelly	Adam Baird
HF:	Jarryd Pertzelt	Caleb Nitschke	Tyson Clingan
F:	Bradlee Pay	Archer Dibsedale	Sam Heavyside
R:	Nick Lang	Josh Nitschke	Ryan Gillingham
INT:	Harry Bremner	Bohden McKnight	Scott Pay
	Jack Daglish		

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ROUND 17, AUGUST 17

MALLEE EAGLES (A)

ROUND 18, AUGUST 24

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Koondrook-Barham



FOOTY FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1997. **GROUND:** Barham Recreation Reserve. **PREMIERSHIPS:** None.
SENIOR COACH: Will Callow. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** 11th. **2023 BEST & FAIREST:** Mitch Christensen.
2023 LEADING GOALKICKER: Mitch Christensen (9 goals).



Best-and-fairest winner Mitch Christensen will be a key player for Koondrook-Barham as he returns for another season.
 Picture: Maryke de Villiers

KEY PLAYER

Mitch Christensen: Won Koondrook-Barham's best and fairest in his first season at the club last year, and will once again be a key player for the tri-colours this year. Can play anywhere on the ground, from key forward and defence to running through the midfield, but is expected to settle into a more permanent forward role this season after also kicking the most goals for the River Raiders last year.

AFTER a winless 2023, the only way is up for the River Raiders, with the club's investment in youth to continue this season under the tutelage of Will Callow.

It's been a patient rebuild for the Koondrook-Barham faithful, and they will need to continue to be patient for a little while longer, with the Raiders facing a tough start to the season, having games against top three teams Kerang, Balranald and NNW United within the first five rounds.

But while last year was one to forget, the positives were certainly starting to show by season's end, with Callow and the Raiders brains trust encouraged by the performances of several young players, particularly Ryan Bassett, Xavier Leonard, Nick Frankling, Nathaniel Leonard and Will Lake.

"We have some good kids coming through," Callow said.

"Unfortunately we've lost Eli Boyd, who's gone to Echuca, but there's definitely some good kids coming through the system and they have the right attitude.

"We're not looking for a flash in the pan, we want to build long-term success and we know it's not going to happen overnight but we're taking steps in the right direction.

"We've got a pretty tough draw, there's no hiding behind that, we play all the top three sides from last year twice and we've got them all in the first month, but the flip side of that is that it's a great challenge for our young group.

"We're going to attack that first month with nothing to lose, we see it as an opportunity to get out there and test ourselves against the best, because we want to improve and that's the only way you can do it, is to play against the best.

"We've topped up with another five or six successful footballers from the Sunraysia area which will certainly help develop those talented kids, but development will still be the main focus for the season."

Nathan Hamence is the one who comes to the Raiders with the greatest pedigree, having won five premierships with Irymple, multiple club best-and-fairests and the McLeod Medal as the Sunraysia league's best and fairest. Hamence should slot straight into Koondrook-Barham's midfield, along with Wentworth pair Cambell Davison and Jordan McKinnon.

Also joining the River Raiders this season will be Nathan and Jason Hura and former

VFL player Billy Driscoll, who won multiple premierships with the North Ballarat Roosters. But perhaps the biggest improvement will come from within, with spring-heeled forward Kye Attwell set to return after missing last season with injury and Callow looking forward to seeing what his new look forward line can produce.

"There's a pretty obvious brand within the Central Murray and most teams play that slingshot footy across half-back and we won't be too much different," Callow said.

"We've got a big ground there that can be hard to defend and we want to try and create a fortress at home for opposition teams to play at and, with that, be a fast, running side.

"Hopefully having Nathan Hura, along with Mitch Christensen and Kye Attwell, should be a pretty dangerous forward line.

"And with Billy Driscoll down there as well, all of the sudden we've got some firepower to hit the scoreboard with.

"We'll be aiming to play fast, free-flowing football and get it into those guys as quickly as we can, then hopefully we can challenge a few clubs."

FROM THE COACH

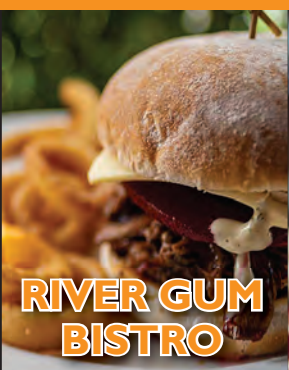
"Coming off last year we just want to see some gradual improvement, the boys have had a really strong pre-season and it's been really encouraging watching the team strive to improve, learn and develop. I can't fault the attitude of the playing group and I think their desire to improve will hold us in good stead moving forward."

INS & OUTS

INS: Cambell Davison (Wentworth), Jordan McKinnon (Wentworth), Nathan Hura (Bambill), Jason Hura (Bambill), Billy Driscoll (Navarre), Nathan Hamence (Irymple), Brayden Turvey (Murrabit).

OUTS: Harley Burmeister-Lyons (The Basin), Domenico Cirillo (Irymple), Dominic Dick-O'Flaherty (Elmore), Eli Boyd (Echuca), Colin McVeigh, Jake Lowry.

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Lake Boga



FOOTY FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1997. **GROUND:** Lake Boga Recreation Reserve. **PREMIERSHIPS:** 1 (2003).
PRESIDENT: Trevor Doolan. **SENIOR COACH:** Dean Helmers. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** 4th (Elimination finalist).
2023 BEST & FAIREST: Jacob Simpson. **2023 LEADING GOALKICKER:** Lochie Laing (24 goals).

Kai Everett will be one of several young players to be blooded into Lake Boga's seniors team this season under new coach Dean Helmers.
 Picture: Brook Shaune-Bould



A MASS exodus of senior players looks set to end the Magpies' two-year finals streak, as the club instead turns to youth under new coach Dean Helmers.

Since suffering a 44-point defeat in last year's elimination final against NNW United, Lake Boga have undergone some serious changes, having up to 19 senior players from last season departing, along with senior coaches Shawn Filo and Angus Monfries.

The exits of Filo and Monfries gave experienced coach Dean Helmers the reins this season to lead his third Central Murray club after stints at the Mallee Eagles and Tooleybuc-Manangatang.

But a shift in leadership won't be the only change as the club heads in a new direction with its playing list.

Helmers was keen to help guide Lake Boga's next generation through the early stages of their senior careers.

"We're most likely going to be the youngest side in the competition this season by a long way, I would imagine," Helmers said.

"The main goal from the club's point of view is that we want to get 40 to 50 games into these kids, some of whom haven't even made their senior debuts yet.

"It's only early days, but having had plenty of discussions around the club, everyone's on the same page, and while you never want to lose too many players year on year, turnover can be a healthy thing.

"The club had a number of non-local players last season and they've had a really strong junior program over the last few years and it's important to give those younger guys an opportunity to transition from colts to seniors."

The club has also looked to entice local talent back, with former juniors Brodie Tonkin, Zac Warne, Aaron Lonergan and Jarrod Taylor returning, and former Swan Hill junior Lachlan Wooding and former North Melbourne VFL player Will Doquille joining.

While all six players will provide Lake Boga with some much-needed cover through the middle and down back, they won't offset the losses of key players Jake Warren, Jacob Simpson, Tyle Williams, Lincoln Sieben, Lochie Laing, Daniel Dzufer, Dustin Burns and Matt Taverna, among others.

Although not expecting to push for premiership glory, Helmers remained bullish about what his side could achieve this season,

especially after a strong pre-season.

"We'll be looking to play a pretty exciting brand, we'll be looking to encourage them to take the game on and move the ball up the ground," Helmers said.

"Their skills are improving rapidly and because the group has had a bit of success over the past few seasons, they want more.

"We want this squad of local kids to play a lot of footy together over the next five or six years and become the backbone of our club's next premiership team.

"A lot of people aren't expecting much from us this year, we've all heard the comments from people outside the club, but we're not worried about what anyone thinks.

"We've been getting up to 30 blokes some nights on the track over the pre-season which is fantastic, so we're definitely heading in the right direction."

FROM THE COACH

"We'll be aiming to play an exciting brand of footy. In a perfect world, hopefully we don't drop away too much, but at the same time, when you have a big turnover of players that can sometimes be the reality. I'd still be expecting us to be competitive at the very least."

INS & OUTS

INS: Zac Warne (Geelong West Giants), Aaron Lonergan (Moama), Lachlan Wooding (Whitehorse Pioneers), Will Doquille (Old Xavierians), Brodie Tonkin (Old Melbournians), Jarrod Taylor (Nullawil).

OUTS: Angus Monfries (Maiden Gully YCW), Jake Warren (Tatura), Jacob Simpson (Tatura), Tyle Williams (Tatura), Lincoln Sieben, Daniel Dzufer, Dustin Burns, Lochie Laing, Mitchell Whitfield (Woorinen), Cameron Johnson (Ultima), Matt Taverna (Ultima), Lincoln Frost (Ultima), Ricky Wild (Ultima), Hunter Hartland (Moulamein), Byron Holt (Huntly), Noah Sherlock (Huntly), Ryan Harvey (Murrabit), Xander Hartland (Moulamein), Tobie Richardson (Balranald).

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Mallee Eagles



FOOTY FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1997. **GROUND:** Lalbert Recreation Reserve. **PREMIERSHIPS:** None.
PRESIDENT: Tony Holloway. **SENIOR COACHES:** Brent Macleod and Harry Allen. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** 9th.
2023 BEST & FAIREST: Zac O'Meara. **2023 LEADING GOALKICKER:** Brent Macleod (39 goals).



Mallee Eagles young gun Billy O'Meara and his teammates will be aiming to climb the ladder and return to the finals this season. Picture: Noel Fisher

THE Mallee Eagles enter this season as the great unknown, with several star recruits and a change in leadership set to catapult them up the ladder.

After finishing last season with just four wins, there is an air of expectation surrounding the Eagles that a far more competitive outfit will take to the field, with the bulk of last year's playing list having re-committed and giving cause for hope.

While Angus McKenzie, Brandon Gardiner and Andrew McDonald won't return, the new recruits far outweigh their departures, with Darcy Hourigan, Jayden Post, Troy Anderson and Jordan Robins all expected to have a major impact on the Central Murray.

Hourigan could well be the biggest addition, a gun key forward likely to provide the Eagles with the marking target they have been crying out for in recent seasons. Post could also fill that role and has the ability to play at either end of the ground, while Robins and Anderson are expected to add speed and outside run to a team that now has some quality attacking weapons.

The Mallee Eagles recruits won't be the only change, however, with Brent Macleod and Harry Allen taking over the coaching duties from Brent Sheahan. For Allen, to coach his home club is a dream that's about to be realised, but of more importance is his club's desire to climb back into the top five.

"We're bullish and confident with what we can do this year, but we're not getting ahead of ourselves," Allen said.

"We've recruited really well, but more importantly, we've got plenty of young guys that have had massive pre-seasons and then guys coming back from injury such as Toby Sheahan, who'll be like a new recruit for us.

"Honestly, finals is the bare minimum for us I feel, there's a real hunger within our playing group that we want to be playing finals, but then everyone is hoping to achieve the same thing so we really won't know until the season gets under way to see where we fit."

The other positive for the Eagles will be the continued improvement from their local contingent, with Zac O'Meara having won the Eagles' best and fairest last season and Billy O'Meara on track for a breakout year after a strong showing in 2023. Add in Beau Bennett, Darcy McGregor and Brady Fordham and the

Eagles should also have the depth to compete with the better clubs according to Allen.

"We haven't had this level of depth for several years now, so to go into a season with five or six guys who really should be playing senior footy and be likely to miss out on a game is pretty exciting to be honest," Allen said.

"Depth is so important to being successful, especially when injuries happen each year in one form or another.

"The way we've set up our team and our focus across the pre-season has really been around being a good stoppage team, but then we have guys on the outside that can break the lines as well.

"Most teams tend to prioritise one or the other, be it winning the contested ball or outside run, whereas we feel we have a team that can exploit both."

FROM THE COACH

"There's a positive feeling around the club currently, a bit of a revamp of the footy department and I suppose, more importantly, our whole game plan is totally different to what we've been playing over the last few seasons. We've been a bit disappointed with our last two seasons, and I think we'd be a bit disappointed again if we didn't make the top five."

INS & OUTS

INS: Jordan Robins (Altona Vikings), Harry Hollow (Nairne Bremer), Darcy Hourigan (Nairne Bremer), Troy Anderson (Modewarre), Jayden Post (Altona Vikings), Jai Middleton (Beechworth), Kieren Bourke (Newcomb), Clem Miller (Langhorn Creek).

OUTS: Jacob Wade (Murrabit), Jack Shannahan (Murrabit), Angus McKenzie (retired), Brandon Gardiner, Andrew McDonald, Brent Sheahan.

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WHAT TO EXPECT IN 2024

It's been a tough couple of seasons for the Eagles, with just eight wins from their last 29 matches, but a much-improved and highly competitive Mallee outfit is what's expected to run onto the park this season. A change in game plan should also improve performance, with the Eagles' ball movement considered slow and predictable at times last year. Their biggest challenge will be in getting their playing list to gel, with several new recruits joining the club this off-season and travelling each week. Will ease into the season with games against Tooleybuc-Manangatang and Swan Hill either side of their round 2 bye, with double-up matches against Kerang, NNW United and Cohuna to come.

BIG IMPROVER

Billy O'Meara: After making his debut in 2022, O'Meara followed up by playing every match in the seniors in what became a breakout year last season. By year's end, O'Meara had developed into a starting onballer, although with an influx of recruits, he will likely play more across half-forward and become part of the Eagles' rotations. This should only benefit O'Meara's game, where he can continue to develop without the pressure of impacting the match every week.

THE BURNING QUESTION

Will the Eagles be able to gel together with so many new recruits and travellers?
We're not likely to know the answer until midway through the season in fairness, but the early signs are certainly positive. The early indications coming from the Eagles after their practice matches are that gelling together shouldn't be an issue, with the recruits, both new and from last year, along with the locals, all on the same page and intent on success. Winning games is the only concern now, and if the men in blue and gold can put some points on the board early in the season, their belief will skyrocket.



Reigning best-and-fairest Zac O'Meara will return for the Mallee Eagles and be a player to watch this season. Picture: Noel Fisher

KEY PLAYER

Zac O'Meara: While it's hard to overlook Darcy Hourigan, who comes to the Eagles with massive wraps on him, there is also no denying how important O'Meara has become to his side in recent seasons. Can play any position on the ground, from key forward, midfield or even in the ruck, but it's been across half-back where he has had the most influence on the game. His ability to read the play and thwart many opposition advances with his contested marking makes him invaluable to the Eagles and was duly rewarded by winning his first senior best-and-fairest last year.

MALLEE EAGLES' POSSIBLE BEST 22

B:	Clinton Cummins	Joe Halloran	Brett Thomas
HB:	Toby Sheahan	Zac O'Meara	Shaun Harrison
C:	Beau Bennett	Harry Allen	Darcy McGregor
HF:	Troy Anderson	Jayden Post	Billy O'Meara
F:	Brent Macleod	Darcy Hourigan	Harry Hollow
R:	Jai Middleton	Brady Fordham	Jordan Robins
INT:	Liam Drummond	Paul Davis	Jonah Devlin
	Wes Bennett		

2024 FIXTURE

ROUND 1, APRIL 13

TOOLEYBUC-MANANGATANG (A)

ROUND 2, APRIL 20

BYE

ROUND 3, APRIL 27 – ANZAC

SWAN HILL

ROUND 4, MAY 4

NNW UNITED (A)

ROUND 5, MAY 11

COHUNA KANGAS

ROUND 6, MAY 18 – THANKS

KERANG (A)

ROUND 7, MAY 25

LAKE BOGA

ROUND 8, JUNE 1

BALRANALD (A)

ROUND 9, JUNE 15 – PRIDE

TYNTYNDER

ROUND 10, JUNE 22

KOONDROOK-BARHAM (A)

ROUND 11, JUNE 29

WOORINEN

ROUND 12, JULY 13 – NAIDOC

BYE

ROUND 13, JULY 20

TOOLEYBUC-MANANGATANG

ROUND 14, JULY 27

COHUNA KANGAS (A)

ROUND 15, AUGUST 3 – RIBBON

NNW UNITED

ROUND 16, AUGUST 10

SWAN HILL (A)

ROUND 17, AUGUST 17

KERANG

ROUND 18, AUGUST 24

LAKE BOGA (A)



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Nyah-Nyah West United



FOOTY
FAST
FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1997. **GROUND:** Nyah Recreation Reserve. **PREMIERSHIPS:** 2 (2000, 2001).

PRESIDENT: Jarrod Skinner. **SENIOR COACHES:** Nick O'Neill and Jason Murphy.

2023 LADDER POSITION: 5th (Preliminary finalist). **2023 BEST & FAIREST:** Joel Walsh.

2023 LEADING GOALKICKER: Hassan Ahmat-Watkins (50 goals).



NNW United midfielder Ethan Saville will be a key player around the stoppages.
 Picture: Noel Fisher

AFTER a breakthrough preliminary-final appearance last season, the young Demons will be hungry for more success in 2024, according to new coach Jason Murphy.

During a breakout 2023 campaign, Nyah-Nyah West United rose to prominence on the back of an exciting, all-out attack game plan that shocked opposition teams into submission.

Murphy was confident the league would see more of the same this season, as the club looked to refine their brand of football even further.

“The way the boys have attacked the pre-season has proven to me that they don’t want to fall away and that last year wasn’t just a once-off,” Murphy said.

“We don’t want to put a ceiling on our season, to be honest. If we get the chance, we want to win it all.

“Our speed will once again be our biggest asset, it’s something that we’re really promoting as a club.

“We had our coaches’ meeting the other night and we’re trying to implement this attacking style across all our junior teams and the reserves, we want it to be a brand that our clubs known for.”

Murphy comes to NNW United following the departure of long-time coach Corey Daniels and will join forces with Nick O’Neill, who coached alongside Daniels last season.

But while they were one of the surprise packets last season, that element of surprise is no longer there – opponents are now well aware of the brand of footy the Demons like to deploy.

But as with all game plans, Murphy said his club’s style would continue to evolve, flagging a more organised defence, while continuing to play with flair in attack.

“We want to move the game forward and keep coming at the opposition,” Murphy said.

“Everyone knows the way we want to play now, there’s no secrets there.

“It suits our playing group to play that way and take the game on, but I guess what we’ve been trying to do this off-season is organise the chaos a little bit.

“We’ve just been working on a few different structures and nailing down our press and so on, so there’s been more of a focus on organising the chaos and keeping everything

a little bit more predictable to us, but not the opposition.

“We nailed down the way we wanted to move the footy last year, so that training hasn’t gone away, but our defensive structures have been a real focus over the summer.”

NNW United will lose top-end players Jarrod Stokes and Hassan Ahmat-Watkins, both of whom were influential through the midfield and up forward last season, while key defender Dean Harrop has also left for Murrabit.

While the departures of three quality players would ordinarily impact most clubs, the Demons have secured three ready-made replacements, with onballers Jordan and Lucas Iudica set to boost the midfield, while the return of key defender Cal Dobbin from a knee injury will help offset the loss of Harrop.

Undoubtedly, NNW United’s biggest recruit is dual century-goalkicker Brandyn Grenfell, who will join after back-to-back premierships with Marong, and looks set to provide his new club with the key marking target up forward that they desperately needed last season.

FROM THE COACH

“We’re not going to put a ceiling on our season. We obviously finished off pretty well last year and we want to make sure we continue to move forward and hopefully go a few steps further.”

KEY PLAYER

Joel Walsh: Won his second club best-and-fairest after returning to the Demons last season. Walsh’s form form across half-back was one of the factors in his team’s rise to preliminary finalists last season, with his untimely hamstring strain a key reason for NNW United’s capitulation to eventual premiers Kerang.

Has developed into one of the league’s pre-eminent intercept defenders, with his ability to read the play making him one of the Demons’ key players. Strong through the hips with a booming right foot, it wouldn’t surprise to see Walsh run through the midfield on occasions.

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WHAT TO EXPECT IN 2024

Hopefully more of the same as in 2023. There's no doubt the Demons were the most exciting team to watch last year, with their quick, attacking brand breathing new life into the Central Murray competition.

With a similar squad, minus key players Jarrod Stokes and Hassan Ahmat-Watkins, it's expected that NNW United should once again be thereabouts come finals time.

The addition of key forward Brandyn Grenfell is a huge plus, while the recruitment of the Iudica brothers should help add depth to their midfield. The only query is whether they have enough top-level talent to match it with the absolute best sides.

BIG IMPROVER

Liam White: Heading into his second season of senior footy for NNW United, White looks set to explode after a big pre-season. Played 10 senior matches in 2023, including a five-goal haul in round 1 against Koondrook-Barham, before falling out of favour late in the season. An energetic forward who can push up the ground, White will be one of the main beneficiaries of having key marking target Brandyn Grenfell in the Demons' line-up.

THE BURNING QUESTION

What affect will the new O'Neill-Murphy coaching team have on the Demons game style?

One of the reasons for NNW United's success in 2023 was their fast, attacking game style, that was built around taking risks and playing on at every opportunity under Corey Daniels and Nick O'Neill. It was a game plan that perfectly suited their team, with several clubs coming undone by the Demons' speed from the contest and outside run.

But with new joint coach Jason Murphy taking over from Daniels, will NNW United continue to attack and take the game on – or will they implement a more structured style of game plan?

Early signs throughout practice matches would indicate a combination of both, with a more organised defensive structure set to combine with the same fast, attacking style of football going forward.

What they lose in being more organised behind the ball remains to be seen, but they will certainly be exciting to watch.



Dom Gallo in action last season for NNW United. Gallo and his teammates will be aiming to go a couple of steps further than their preliminary final finish last season. Picture: Noel Fisher

INS & OUTS

INS: Brandyn Grenfell (Marong), Jordan Iudica (Kyneton), Lucas Iudica (Kyneton), Jackson Hopkins (Port Douglas Crocs).

OUTS: Dean Harrop (Murrabit), Joseph Violi (Huntly), Jarrod Stokes, Hassan Ahmat-Watkins, Corey Daniels.

NNW UNITED'S POSSIBLE BEST 22

B:	Cal Dobbin	Joel Campbell	Mitch Grinham
HB:	Brady Davidson	Joel Walsh	Jaydyn Stirling
C:	Brayden Bigham	Ethan Saville	Campbell Everitt
HF:	Charlie Boulton	Nick O'Neill	Lucas Iudica
F:	Riley Daniels	Brandyn Grenfell	Dom Gallo
R:	Alex Erlandson	Jordan Iudica	Kayne Davidson
INT:	Liam White	Jarrold Skinner	Zack Threadgold
	Nic Threadgold		

2024 FIXTURE

ROUND 1, APRIL 13

KOONDROOK-BARHAM (A)

ROUND 2, APRIL 20

WOORINEN (N)

ROUND 3, APRIL 27 – ANZAC

TOOLEYBUC-MANANGATANG (A)

ROUND 4, MAY 4

MALLEE EAGLES

ROUND 5, MAY 11

SWAN HILL (A)

ROUND 6, MAY 18 – THANKS

BYE

ROUND 7, MAY 25

COHUNA KANGAS

ROUND 8, JUNE 1

KERANG (A)

ROUND 9, JUNE 15 – PRIDE

LAKE BOGA

ROUND 10, JUNE 22

BALRANALD (A)

ROUND 11, JUNE 29

TYNTYNDER

ROUND 12, JULY 13 – NAIDOC

WOORINEN (A)

ROUND 13, JULY 20

KOONDROOK-BARHAM

ROUND 14, JULY 27

SWAN HILL

ROUND 15, AUGUST 3 – RIBBON

MALLEE EAGLES (A)

ROUND 16, AUGUST 10

TOOLEYBUC-MANANGATANG

ROUND 17, AUGUST 17

BYE

ROUND 18, AUGUST 24

COHUNA KANGAS (A)





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Swan Hill



FOOTY FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1997. **GROUND:** Swan Hill Recreation Reserve. **PREMIERSHIPS:** 3 (2005, 2008, 2011).
PRESIDENT: Carl Hufer. **SENIOR COACH:** Michael Herlihy. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** 7th.
2023 BEST & FAIREST: Matthew Wade. **2023 LEADING GOALKICKER:** Jose Miliado (26 goals).



Swan Hill young gun Lachlan Vrolijk will be one of several players vying for a regular senior game under new coach Michael Herlihy. Picture: Noel Fisher

IT will be a very different Swan Hill team that opens the season against Woorinen next Saturday, having lost two of the greatest ever players to pull on maroon and white.

Life without Matthew Wade and Xavier Moloney has been creeping up on the Swans over the past few seasons. It has now become a reality, with both veterans flying the nest.

It won't be just the loss of Wade and Moloney that will hurt this season, with another 10 senior players from last season also deciding to either move onto greener pastures or hang up their boots, including Leighton Dullard, Zach Mihocek and Jared Halligan.

But while losing not just the number and quality of players would be dagger to the heart of most clubs' campaigns, that isn't the case for the Swans, who remain bullish about the season ahead with a fresh voice and several high-quality recruits set to breathe new life into the club.

Michael Herlihy will take over the reins from Cal Beasy for his first coaching stint, with the former South Bendigo and Numurkah midfielder looking to the challenge that awaits him without Wade and Moloney at his disposal.

"They're obviously two very different players, 'Xav' (Moloney) is obviously very skilful and 'Wadey' (Wade) is just a competitive beast," Herlihy said.

"Losing their experience is going to hurt us a lot, but we also understand their reasons for going and they don't owe the club anything – they've both been loyal servants and superstars for the club over a long period of time and they leave with everyone's blessing.

"But in terms of who we've recruited, we've recruited a bit more experience to help us fill that void, and I've said to the boys it's just another challenge for us, everyone just steps up now and helps fill that void that's been left.

"It's a new Swan Hill look without them there, but what we can control is how we play football and going forward, we just want to have the best 22 on the park and do the best we can."

Indeed, the Swans have seemingly filled the experience void left by their former club champions, with former AFL onballer Jimmy Toumpas signing on with the Swans, along with key forward Ned McKeown, defender Anthony Lewin and two-time EG Hunt Medallist Tom Isma. Also joining the Swans this season is former Woorinen winger Nyawi Moore, while

Cooper Angus and Tom Spicer will pull on the Swan Hill guernsey once again.

While the new recruits should hold them in good stead for the year ahead, it's the future talent that had Herlihy excited by what he'd seen throughout a testing and challenging pre-season.

"We know we've got really good kids and the fruits of that will come in a few more years," Herlihy said.

"Even though they are still four or five years away from being really good senior footballers, if we can have them coming through and mix them in with our experienced recruits, it will be a good mix and that's what gets you into finals and beyond.

"We won't be blessed with a lot of height around the ground, so we really want to move the ball quickly and use that to our advantage, yet on the defensive side we want to be a very organised side behind the footy."

FROM THE COACH

"Hopefully a progression on last year, especially after missing the finals by percentage in the end. Every team wants to play finals and we're no exception to that, so hopefully we can progress on last year and push into the top five. Every club picks up players at this time of year and everyone is buoyant about how they're going to go, but footy is a funny game, so you never know."

INS & OUTS

INS: Michael Herlihy (Sth Bendigo), Jimmy Toumpas (Wood-West Torrens), Anthony Lewin (BL-Serpentine), Tom Isma (Woorinen), Ned McKeown (Macleod), Ben Parkes (Golden Square), Nyawi Moore (Heywood), Cooper Angus (Monash Blues), Tom Spicer (Toohey-Manang), Hamish McDonald (Uni Blues).

OUTS: Xavier Moloney (Terang Mortlake), Matthew Wade (Nullawil), Buol Majur (Heidelberg), Jude Seymour (Heidelberg), Hamish Robertson, Leighton Dullard, Tom Pontell, Jared Halligan, Brenton Halligan, Seamus Doherty, Zach Mihocek, Angus Monk.

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Tooleybuc-Manangatang



FOOTY FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1997. **GROUND:** Tooleybuc Recreation Reserve. **PREMIERSHIPS:** 1 (2007).
PRESIDENT: Rick Plant **SENIOR COACH:** Brad Morris. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** 10th.
2023 BEST & FAIREST: Ethan Goldfinch. **2023 LEADING GOALKICKER:** Josh Williams (54 goals).



Ruckman Connor McDonald will return for the Saints and is set to play a big part in his side's push to climb up the ladder.
Picture: Nick Moseley

INS & OUTS

INS: Kai Kearns (Heidelberg), Jesse Kane (Heidelberg), Connor Nutting (North Adelaide), Elliott Chalmers (PINT), Jackson Morris (Tyntynder), Zach Prentice (Moulamein), Billy Bentley (Macorna).
OUTS: Ethan Goldfinch (East Coast Swans), Tom Carland (Coburg Districts), Lachlan Gleeson (retired), Jack Mazzarella (injured), Peter Rothacker, Tim Auckland, Jack Spinks, Shane Foley, Shayne Goldfinch (East Coast Swans), Tom Spicer (Swan Hill), Jett Funnell (Balranald), Liam Baldwin, Harper McNicol.

TOOLEYBUC-Manangatang will be hoping a return to their past is the way forward this season, having former coach Brad Morris back at the helm of his home club.

With just four wins over the past three seasons, the Saints are this year aiming for a change of fortunes under Morris, who led the club to consecutive finals appearances in 2015 and 2016.

It won't just be a new coach that gives Tooleybuc-Manangatang a different look, however, having secured the services of several impactful recruits.

Both Connor Nutting and Elliott Chalmers arrive with impressive resumes. Nutting was drafted to the Gold Coast Suns in 2017, while Chalmers spent several seasons plying his trade in the SANFL with Glenelg and North Adelaide. Both are expected to add depth and class to the Saints' midfield and forward rotations, along with Heidelberg pair Kai Kearns and Jesse Kane.

While pleased with the calibre of players recruited, Morris said it was his club's ability to retain the bulk of last year's recruits that had him enthusiastic ahead of their round 1 encounter with the Mallee Eagles.

"Being able to retain six of the eight recruits we secured last year has been a big plus for us," Morris said.

"Not turning those guys over has enabled us to be able to build on last season, and a few of those boys having a few connections has also helped us identify a few of this year's recruits.

"With our recruiting, it was more about getting the right people and the right players as opposed to just getting anyone, which you can fall into the trap of sometimes, especially with a lack of players around our area."

Also pulling on the red, white and black this season will be former players Jackson Morris, Billy Bentley and Zach Prentice, with Morris returning to the club having spent the past few seasons plagued by injury at Tyntynder.

On the other side of the equation, the Saints have lost reigning best-and-fairest Ethan Goldfinch, while veterans Tom Carland, Lachlan Gleeson and Jack Spinks have also moved on.

While the loss of Goldfinch will hurt, the retention of key position players Josh Williams, Jaicob Kenny, Jonathan Marsden,

Connor McDonald and John Wardle leaves the Saints well stocked at either end of the ground.

Morris was excited by the prospect of what looms as one of the most potent forward lines in the Central Murray.

"I'm hoping our forward line will be a bit of a strength of ours," he said.

"We've got plenty of talent down there, with guys like Josh Williams, Kai Kearns, Connor Nutting and Jono Marsden, they've all got size and athleticism, so we're hoping that we might be able to stretch some opposition back lines for height and speed.

"We've been working pretty hard on moving the ball by foot and we've done a lot of work on our fitness as well, but we've been really focusing heavily on moving the ball clean and quick by foot so that we can use it efficiently going forward and give those guys every chance of hitting the scoreboard."

FROM THE COACH

"As a club, we've spoken about where we're at and we really need to improve. We've been off the boil for a few years now and the time's right to try and build some foundations back up and get things heading in the right direction. Success helps that, but you have to have the right people around the club and I think from that perspective we are heading in the right direction."

KEY PLAYER

Josh Williams: The former North Melbourne forward had a remarkable first season for Tooleybuc-Manangatang, booting 54 goals from 15 matches and narrowly missing out on winning the Central Murray's leading goalkicker award, despite his team winning just two matches.

This should be all the proof needed as to how important Williams is to his team's fortunes this season, especially if the Saints' recruits can provide him with more opportunities to hit the scoreboard. Unstoppable on the lead and clean below his knees, Williams is a nightmare match-up for any opposition defender.



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Tyntynder



FOOTY FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1997. **GROUND:** Alan Garden Reserve. **PREMIERSHIPS:** 3 (1997, 1998, 1999).
PRESIDENT: Peter Hawkins. **SENIOR COACH:** Jack O'Rourke. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** 8th.
2023 BEST & FAIREST: Matthew Gillbee. **2023 LEADING GOALKICKER:** Jason Eagle (22 goals).

Patrick Blake flies high for a mark last season. Blake will return for the Bulldogs this year when his Bendigo Pioneer duties allow. Picture: Phoebe Doyle



THE BURNING QUESTION

Who plays in the ruck in season 2024?

With Hugh Broad set to miss the season with a knee injury, and Angus Crowe also expected to be a late starter, O'Rourke and the Bulldogs' brains trust have a big decision to make. Thankfully, they have plenty of options, but exactly who's best suited to give their midfield the upper hand at stoppages – especially with a big emphasis being placed on winning the

contested ball – will clearly be a big factor in their season.

Elia Ware looms as the most logical first choice, as he tends to play his best footy up around the ball, although if Cameron Cook is fully fit after missing last season with injury, then he too could be a strong option.

Matthew Gillbee is another who can play in the ruck, but with him being such a key component of the Bulldogs' back six, he could be better suited to starting there.

A CHANGE of coach and an influx of talent has the Tyntynder faithful hoping a return to finals football is on the cards.

After breaking an eight-season finals drought in 2022, last season was one to forget for the Bulldogs, with injuries and a drop in form to key players not only knocking them out of the top five, but down to a 4-12 win-loss record.

With Josh Stone returning to Woorinen this season, experienced senior coach Jack O'Rourke has stepped in to fill the void, with the former Tooleybuc-Manangatang and Ultima leader expecting a much-improved performance from the Bulldogs.

"With a bit more structure and a bit more discipline and just with getting everyone working together as a unit, I think we'll see some big improvement," O'Rourke said.

"When we start playing for each other a bit more, the results will follow.

"We've recruited well, but we've lost a few good players as well, but regardless of our ins and outs, the one big positive is that our depth will be a lot better this year, especially with some of the talent that is coming out of the under-18s with kids like Harry Kelly, Wil Hawkins and Cayden Dalton.

"That's probably where most of the excitement is for us to be honest.

"(Jayden) Magro comes with a great wrap and he's going to be really good for us and Marcus Wattie has taken his footy to another level, he's just playing a more complete brand of footy and that's a result of playing at a higher level, but it's our kids that have been the most impressive over the pre-season."

The recruitment of Jayden Magro is undoubtedly a huge fillip for Tyntynder, with the former WAFL and NTFL forward arriving at the club with huge wraps, along with Marcus Wattie, who returns to his home club and will add a touch of class to their midfield that was at times lacking last season.

Also returning to the Dogs are former players Luke Jones, Darcy Woodward, Lachie Carroll and Cameron Cook, who is back after missing last season with injury, with Ned Lay (Balranald), Matthew King (Woorinen) and Lachie Martin (Moulamein) also set to add some much-needed depth to the senior squad.

Also returning is full-forward Jason Eagle, who will be a key part in what looms to be a

potent forward line for Tyntynder, with Magro, Justin Ellis, Matt Corney and Pat Blake, when he isn't on Pioneers duties, all capable of posing a threat both in the air and on the ground.

While the Bulldogs' forward line looks more than capable of kicking a winning score, it's been their midfield where much of the focus has been over the past six months, with O'Rourke looking to a change in game style.

"Contested footy and winning the ball around the stoppages will be a big focus for us this year," O'Rourke said.

"We've done a lot of full contact work over the pre-season and the boys have really improved with their contested ball work.

"Every coach has a slightly different belief and style with who they like the game being played, but I reckon that will be our strength, our ability to get our hands on the ball first and get it going our way."

FROM THE COACH

"We just want to be more competitive as a team and as a club. We just want to improve our behaviour on and off the field and look for improvement that way, and if we get that right we know we'll get results."

INS & OUTS

INS: Marcus Wattie (Shepparton United), Lachie Carroll (Pyramid Hill), Jayden Magro (Waratahs), Luke Jones (Daylesford), Ned Lay (Balranald), Darcy Woodward (Pyramid Hill), Cameron Cook (returning), Cal Lyons (Woorinen), Lachie Martin (Moulamein), Matt King (Woorinen).

OUTS: Josh Stone (Woorinen), Liam Whelan (Boronia), Brodie Bennett (Ultima), Tate Hulland (Ouyen United), Ryan Featherby (Ultima), Tyrone Bean.

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Woorinen



FOOTY FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1997. **GROUND:** Woorinen Recreation Reserve. **PREMIERSHIPS:** 3 (2002, 2018, 2019)
PRESIDENT: Tim Phillips. **SENIOR COACH:** Marcus Demaria. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** 3rd (Semi-finalist).
2023 BEST & FAIREST: Jye Barry. **2023 LEADING GOALKICKER:** William Colliccoat (43 goals).

Reigning club best-and-fairest Jye Barry will be a player to watch when Woorinen's 2024 campaign gets under way against Swan Hill next weekend. Picture: Brook Shaune-Bould



KEY PLAYER

Jye Barry: Is a multiple Woorinen best-and-fairest winner, having claimed the award after another dominant season in 2023. His speed from the stoppage gives Woorinen's midfield a point of difference and rarely wastes the ball when in possession. Has become one of the Central Murray's premier midfielders in recent years and will need to be at his best if the Tigers are to push deeper into September.

AFTER a straight-sets exit from last year's finals series, Woorinen will be hoping redemption comes in the form of former club champions.

Returning to the Tigers' den this season are former players Arnold Kirby, Josh Stone, Tom Langford and Clayton McCartney, a quartet not only bringing class and depth to some key deficiencies of Woorinen's last year, but also plenty of experience to a relatively young squad.

For Tigers coach Marcus Demaria, who will return for his 10th season in charge, it's that extra layer of experience he hoped could change his team's fortunes at the business end of the competition.

"Even though we've had some key departures, with the players that we've brought in and with a 10 to 15 per cent improvement from the rest of the squad, we feel like we're in a pretty good position to compete again," Demaria said.

"Tom Langford, for example, will be a huge plus for us. He won't be the same player that he was when he was last here, because he's a little bit older now, but he'll make us a three or four-goal better side without even touching the footy, just with his leadership and guidance and everything he does off the ball."

The other big recruit, both figuratively and physically, is Arnold Kirby, the Tigers ruckman returning after plying his trade with Sebastopol last season and with the Waratahs in the NTFL this summer.

With Kirby expected to take over the ruck duties, his return will release Lachie Gardner to play forward, according to Demaria, and help fill a gaping hole in the line-up that was one of the key factors in a poor finals showing last year.

"One thing we lacked all last year was having that key target up forward," Demaria said.

"Come finals time, we actually looked for a makeshift ruckman instead of a forward, which ended up being Ben Hunt, just so we could release Lachie (Gardner) forward.

"Now with Arnie (Kirby) back, that enables us to have at least one of the them down there permanently.

"Our forward line will be a lot more potent as a result, with Will Colliccoat, Clayton McCartney and Josh Stone down there as well.

"They can all present and take a mark, as

well as cover the ground, which is what we want because we'll probably change the way we play and the way our forward set up is with the players coming further up the ground."

While their new recruits should have the Tiger faithful bullish about the season ahead, they have also suffered some key departures, with veteran midfielder Robbie Miller returning to Laharum, defender Angus Butterfield going across to Birchip-Watchem, and Danko Bzenic, Tom Isma and Bailey Fry also seeking fresh starts.

The one that could hurt the most is Dylan Godwin, the classy onballer who finished sixth in Woorinen's best and fairest last season, although Demaria was confident his midfield was well placed to attack the season head on.

"We'll have plenty of depth in the midfield with guys like Jye (Barry), 'Doey' (Josh Domaille), 'Warby' (Lachlan Warburton), Tom Langford, Josh Stone and Mitch Uhlhorn running through there," Demaria said.

"One area we needed to beef up was our midfield and I think we've achieved that – the boys have put in a lot of work throughout pre-season and I think we'll see plenty of improvement."

FROM THE COACH

"We want to get ourselves to a grand final ultimately, that's always the aim as it is for every team. Our intentions are to always make the grand final and win the flag, whether we do or not that's a different story, but I think at our best we are certainly capable of achieving that goal."

INS & OUTS

INS: Arnold Kirby (Sebastopol), Josh Stone (Tyntynder), Tom Langford (Waverley Blues), Clayton McCartney (Oak Park), Mitchell Whitfield (Lake Boga), Luke Merrett (Northcote Park), Jack Hughes (Moama).

OUTS: Matt King (Tyntynder), Patrick Veszpremi (Melton South), Robbie Miller (Laharum), Danko Bzenic (Avondale Heights), Angus Butterfield (Birchip-Watchem), Charlie King (Strathfieldsaye), Tom Isma (Swan Hill), Dylan Godwin (Bell Post Hill), Bailey Fry (Cairns), Mitchel Taylor (Stawell), Austin McKerrow (Murrabit), Cal Lyons (Tyntynder).

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WHAT TO EXPECT IN 2024

Despite losing several players over the off-season, Woorinen should once again be aiming for finals, having also recruited well. The Tigers face a tough start to the season, with games against last year's top three Kerang, Balranald and NNW United, as well as a much-improved Cohuna in their first six games. The return of Arnold Kirby is a major plus and will help with their ball movement around the ground, while the additions of Tom Langford and Clayton McCartney should add depth to their forward line, which was their achilles heel last season. The Tigers play a well-drilled style, pressing opposition teams in defence and then maintaining possession when on the attack, but with disappointing finals exits the past two seasons, we should see some tweaks to their game plan.

BIG IMPROVER

Henry Thompson: Had a breakout season in 2023, finishing fourth in Woorinen's best and fairest and becoming one of his team's most important defenders in the process. Has taken on a role in the Tigers leadership group this season and has taken his game to another level, with a potential push for midfield minutes on the cards for Thompson.

THE BURNING QUESTION

How do Woorinen best manage the Arnold Kirby-Lachie Gardner ruck combination? I don't think it's a coincidence that after playing the majority of last season in the ruck, Lachie Gardner returned to his best form, finishing third in the Tigers' best and fairest. Gardner dominated as Woorinen's sole ruckman, and even though he pushed forward to play as a marking target late in the season, it was in the middle where he produced his best. But with the return of Kirby, who could well be the best ruckman in the competition, what now for Gardner? Clearly he plays forward, as Woorinen are crying out for a key forward who can take a contested mark, but does he play permanently forward, or is it Kirby that plays out of the square – or a combination of both? It will be interesting to watch how the Tigers handle the situation, albeit a positive problem to have.



Woorinen's Josh Domaille in action during last year's qualifying final loss to Balranald. Picture: Noel Fisher

WOORINEN'S POSSIBLE BEST 22

B:	Matthew Gardner	Ben Booth	Henry Thompson
HB:	Otto Conlan	Doug Beames	Tom Langford
C:	Mitch Uhlhorn	Lachlan Warburton	Taylor Cameron
HF:	Josh Stone	Lachlan Gardner	Adam Saunders
F:	Daniel Mase	William Colliccoat	Clayton McCartney
R:	Arnold Kirby	Josh Domaille	Jye Barry
INT:	Hugh Thompson	Will Rush	Mitchell Whitfield
	Tahj Bolton		

2024 FIXTURE

ROUND 1, APRIL 13
SWAN HILL

ROUND 2, APRIL 20
NNW UNITED (N) (A)

ROUND 3, APRIL 27 – ANZAC
COHUNA KANGAS

ROUND 4, MAY 4
KERANG (A)

ROUND 5, MAY 11
LAKE BOGA

ROUND 6, MAY 18 – THANKS
BALRANALD (A)

ROUND 7, MAY 25
TYNTYNDER

ROUND 8, JUNE 1
KOONDROOK-BARHAM (A)

ROUND 9, JUNE 15 – PRIDE
BYE

ROUND 10, JUNE 22
TOOLEYBUC-MANANGATANG

ROUND 11, JUNE 29
MALLEE EAGLES (A)

ROUND 12, JULY 13 – NAIDOC
NNW UNITED

ROUND 13, JULY 20
SWAN HILL (A)

ROUND 14, JULY 27
LAKE BOGA (A)

ROUND 15, AUGUST 3 – RIBBON
KERANG

ROUND 16, AUGUST 10
BYE

ROUND 17, AUGUST 17
BALRANALD

ROUND 18, AUGUST 24
TYNTYNDER (A)



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Central Murray Netball

Last season's Central Murray A Grade premiers Swan Hill.
Picture: Phoebe Doyle



Season could go down to wire again

MUCH like last season, the Central Murray netball competition is shaping up to be another exciting year of netball for players and spectators alike.

It was certainly a close race for last year's premiership title, with little separating the top four teams in Swan Hill, Lake Boga, the Mallee Eagles and Balranald.

The Swans will once again be under the leadership of co-coaches Madeleine Nalder, Kelsey McCoy and Mollie Quin, all of whom will be wanting to keep their winning streak alive with back-to-back flags.

But minor premiers Lake Boga will be out for vengeance after a narrow grand final loss in overtime. With nearly a full line-up returning

to the court and still under the guidance of experienced coach Anne-Marie Stewart, the Magpies are in a good position to be hailed as the team to beat again in 2024.

Both the Swans and the Magpies will need to wary of complacency, while also managing pressure of expectations as the two top sides.

Lots of new coaches are stepping into the top roles this season, with the Cohuna Kangas, Tyntynder, Nyah-Nyah West United and the Eagles all under new leadership.

This season could be when teams like the Kangas finally work their way towards the top half of the ladder, having recruited well in the off-season and taking a positive attitude into

the new year.

The Bulldogs could also finish higher than last year, mixing up their line-up and working hard during pre-season to set themselves up for success.

With an exodus of players from the Eagles, their ladder position might just slip, and Kerang will be looking to claim their podium finish this season after just missing out on finals last year.

Wooden-spooners Koondrook-Barham may struggle to lift themselves from the bottom of the ladder, having trouble recruiting and losing some of their key players.

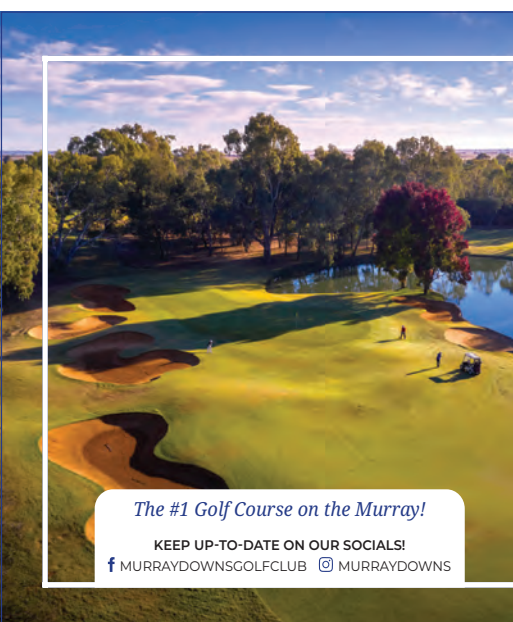
Balranald look to be in a good position to stay up the top of the competition, with Elli-

Jane Pollard joining premiership coach Jess Parry to lead the Roos this season.

So, will the Swans be able to lay claim to their 11th premiership, or will Lake Boga's clinical netball get them over the line this year?

Will Woorinen and the Eagles still be finals contenders, or will the Blues or the Doggies crack the top five instead?

Only one thing is for certain in 2024 – a new year means it is anyone's game to win, and nothing is guaranteed. Good luck to all the clubs, players, coaches and supporters in what is set to be a compelling season of netball ahead.



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Kerang



NETBALL FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1997. **COURT:** Riverside Park. **PREMIERSHIPS:** 2 (1999, 2000).
A GRADE COACH: Chloe Adams. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** 6th.
2023 BEST & FAIREST: Katelyn Wright.

Chloe Adams will lead Kerang both on and off the court again this season.

Picture: Tracey Roberts



COMING up just short of finals last year, Kerang are hoping they can go one step further.

The Blues had a strong line-up that really seemed to find their stride last season, but finished in sixth place, just missing out on a finals spot.

While coach Chloe Adams was pleased overall with how her team performed, she said there was "lots of learning" they will take with them into the new season.

"Considering where the club was in 2022 – not fielding an A Grade at all – to be going and being somewhat competitive and only just missing finals last season is a real positive, and it is something that we definitely look at and think that it is a real step in the right direction," Adams said.

"But obviously at the same time, missing finals is really disappointing and something that we don't want to be happening again this year.

"I think realistically reflecting on last season, while we had some really great games and we pushed top teams at times, we weren't anywhere near those top sides.

"We are fully aware of that, and for us, it's just about continuing to take that step in the right direction and be really pushing for those finals come September."

The Blues go into the new season without shooting combo Olivia Jones and Courtney Robertson, as well as losing midcourter Tahni Clark.

However, the club has done a lot of recruiting the off-season, welcoming nine new players into their A squad, including sisters Danielle Coates and Shannon Baird.

"Watching them return to the club after nearly a decade away is really exciting," Adams said.

"They are both super fit and super competitive with really great skills. Seeing them be back in the navy and white is really exciting, and I can't wait to see them out there alongside each other."

Adams said that this year the Blues were taking on more of a squad mentality in their senior grades, hoping to give both the players an opportunity to prove themselves and the club the best chance of success.

"We're giving people the opportunity throughout the year as well, rewarding effort and changing things up if something's not

working or just being a little bit more fluid with our teams, so that they are not set in stone too early," she said.

"Obviously things are starting to take shape a little bit, but there are still lots of unknowns in terms of positions and combinations, whereas last year we were relatively set early on.

"We have a lot of options, so we just want to be open to all of those heading into the season."

Adams said that while the ultimate goal was what every other team was vying for – to take home the premiership – she just wanted to field a side that was competitive and gave the top teams a run for their money week in, week out.

"That is a really important thing for us, to be up there (with the top teams), be a side people don't find easy to play against, and if we can make that happen then I suppose everything can sort of follow on from there."

FROM THE COACH

"We have lots of new faces this year for our netball, which is really exciting, it brings a lot of life to the club and a bit of a breath of fresh air, so we are looking forward to getting on the court and seeing some new combinations."

PLAYER TO WATCH

Danielle Coates: Coates is set to provide an extra layer of depth to the Blues' A Grade line-up. She has played at Golden Square, Huntly and Newbridge, and her fitness and fierce competitiveness will be an asset to the team.

INS & OUTS

INS: Danielle Coates, Shannon Baird, Emma Chamberlain, Carla Walker, Jarni Gilmour, Mikala McNeill, Kiama Birrer.

OUTS: Courtney Robertson, Tahni Clark, Olivia Jones, Lauren Adams, Remi Macri.

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Koondrook-Barham



NETBALL FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1997. **COURT:** Barham Recreation Reserve. **PREMIERSHIPS:** None.
A GRADE COACH: Grant Matthews. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** 11th.
2023 BEST & FAIREST: Remy Doyle.

Midcourter Tess Doyle in action for Koondrook-Barham last season. Picture: Phoebe Doyle



A NEW season brings new opportunity for Koondrook-Barham's A Grade side, with the wooden-spooners' only aim to be as competitive as they can be.

The River Raiders have now gone winless for the past two seasons. It was particularly disastrous end to last season, losing to Balranald by 89 goals in round 15 and to Woorinen by 96 goals in round 16.

Coach Grant Matthews will continue to lead the struggling side this season.

While Matthews has won 16 premierships as a coach since 2004 at clubs including Mathoura, Katandra, Echuca, Echuca United and the Deniliquin Rovers, he admitted it was going to be a tough ask to get the Raiders back on the winners' list this season.

"I think it's probably going to be a bit tough again for the club," he said.

"We're probably not going to expect any more or less than last year based on having lost a couple of players to university and one or two to retirement, which is going to make it a little bit harder."

Lily Molin, Tess Doyle and Ella Lodge will be among the players heading off to university. Club stalwart Rachel Robertson will also not be taking to the court this season, retiring at the end of last year, while Emily Fasham heads to the Swans and Shanae O'Donoghue continues to recover from an injury.

Reigning club best-and-fairest Remy Doyle will continue to be a pillar in the midcourt. Danica Bloomfield will also don the red, yellow and blue for another season, as will Tlarnee Lake, who returns to the court after a 12-month break.

Matthews admitted they had struggled to find new recruits for their senior grades, and would instead focus on developing their younger players and giving them a taste of senior netball throughout the year.

"We will just continue to focus on what we have within the club, continue our development, developing our juniors, and allowing some of our senior players that were playing A Reserve and B Grade last year a chance to step up," Matthews said.

"The club is just going to work hard within the confinements of what we've got, keep being positive and try to progress."

It will be small steps for the Raiders

this season, but Matthews said the only competition they are really competing with is themselves.

"They have got nothing to prove, they have just got to keep improving on their own aspects of the game, whatever that may be," Matthews said.

"Obviously your top five or six teams are going to be in the elite process again with their player personnel and numbers, and we just have to compete as hard as we can against them and just keep the positivity and development up."

"Hopefully as coaches we can provide those avenues for them, and hopefully we can put those skillsets into their games and see it on display."

FROM THE COACH

"The club is just going to work hard within the confinements of what we've got, keep being positive and try to progress."

PLAYER TO WATCH

Remy Doyle: Last year's best and fairest will continue to play an important role for the Raiders. Currently taking part in the Bendigo Strikers elite coaching pathways program, Doyle will look to take her own game to the next level, and breathe life and energy into the Raiders' midcourt.

INS & OUTS

INS: Tlarnee Lake.

OUTS: Emily Fasham (Swan Hill), Rachel Robertson, Shanae O'Donoghue, Lily Molin, Tess Doyle, Ella Lodge.

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Wes, Sue & the team at Murray River Accounting wish the Raiders all the best for season 2024



Lake Boga

NETBALL FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1997. **COURT:** Lake Boga Recreation Reserve. **PREMIERSHIPS:** None.
A GRADE COACH: Anne-Marie Stewart. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** Runners-up.
2023 BEST & FAIREST: Sarah Hepburn.



Magpies midcourter Taigan O'Shannassy will continue to play an integral role in her team's line-up.
Picture: Brook Shaune-Bould

IT would be easy for Lake Boga to fall into the trap of being caught up in what almost was last season, but coach Anne-Marie Stewart is confident that won't happen.

The Magpies were well and truly the benchmark of the competition last year, only losing one game by a single goal during the home-and-away season.

They were well poised to take home their premiership cup come finals. However, a devastating overtime loss to Swan Hill dashed that dream.

But Stewart is not letting her team dwell on the past.

"Mainly, things that happened were out of our control, so we will start to look at how we can rein that in, and also just keep developing on the next step of the players' journey," she said.

"We can't change it, we only can only control the future."

With pre-season now well under way, the Magpies have started the new year with a fresh perspective and a positive mindset – one that is more focused on growing as people and players, rather than the results on the scoreboard.

"Our girls play because they like each other, they are friends," Stewart said.

"They turn up to play with each other and enjoy each other's company and enjoy the social life within the club as well. It is about friendship I think, it's not all about winning."

The Magpies will likely be among the top teams again this season, sporting a very similar line-up in their A Grade as last year. Sister shooting duo Sarah and Katie Hepburn have both signed back on, as well as Jemma Meehan, Lily Brennan, Taigan O'Shannassy, and Emma and Sophie Peacock.

Also returning to the court this year is experienced defender Felicity Robertson.

However, while Holly Hogan will play some games, she is set to miss a lot of the season travelling, which will leave a big gap in the Magpies midcourt.

But assistant coach Sheridan Harrop was feeling confident for the season ahead, and said it was hard to pick out just one player to keep an eye on.

"They have all got their own journey this year to learn, so it is hard to pick just one out of the crew - we have got seven players on the court at any time that all deserve recognition,"

she said.

Another aspect the club was looking to focus on this year was increasing the skills of their coaches across the board, travelling to Melbourne in the off-season to learn from some of the best coaches in the country.

Harrop said they would now put in place a development program for their players, hoping to ensure the future success of the club.

"We obviously have plenty of numbers in our juniors and across our seniors, which is great, we're fortunate to be in that position," Harrop said.

"But just to support our coaches, the junior development program will be put in place and we will have specialised sessions for seniors."

"We are more about development than anything else – it's not around winning as such, it's trying to set the foundation skills on the right path and then developing our players."

FROM THE COACH

"We don't even talk about winning. We don't set goals, we don't say anything about winning. It is about growing our netball and being a team."

PLAYER TO WATCH

Sarah Hepburn: Wining club best-and-fairest two years running, the talented shooter plays a crucial role in the success of the Magpies' attack end. Working mostly alongside sister Katie, Hepburn is tall and steady in her stance, holding strong against her defenders.

INS & OUTS

INS: Felicity Robertson, Sophie Disher.
OUTS: Holly Hogan, Maddy Gleeson (Moulamein).



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Mallee Eagles

NETBALL
FAST
FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1997. **COURT:** Lalbert Recreation Reserve. **PREMIERSHIPS:** None.
A GRADE COACH: Alicia Harvey. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** Preliminary finalist.
2023 BEST & FAIREST: Laura Sheahan.



Mallee Eagles shooter Megan Thorneycroft will be back this season. Picture: Phoebe Doyle

ON the brink of premiership success for the past two years, the Mallee Eagles are hoping this will be the year they bring home their first cup.

In the past two seasons, the Eagles made it all the way to the preliminary final, each time only narrowly going down to the eventual premiers.

Stepping into the role of A Grade coach this season, Alicia Harvey wanted the Eagles finally make it to the big dance after consecutive heartbreaks.

“It is definitely something that we are keeping in the back of our minds, but we are really hoping to break that curve,” Harvey said.

The Eagles will field a very different team to what they had last year, losing four of their most key players in midcourter Sonya Lorenzoni, attacker Amelia Shannahan, one of the league’s best shooters Kellie Walker and last year’s coach Meg Allen.

But the news isn’t all bad, Leah McKenzie returning to the court after a pregnancy and injury to play a big role down the Eagles’ defence end alongside reigning club best-and-fairest Laura Sheahan.

Kasey Torr will also return to the Eagles this year, while Gemma Miller makes her way to the club from Moulamein.

“I think with the new additions, particularly in the A Grade side that we’ve got, there is a lot of experience, a lot of players who are very good at directing, especially with the younger players,” Harvey said.

“That experience in finals is definitely something that we might have lacked in previous years, and I think we have really got that this year with the likes of Kasey, Gemma and those kind of players.”

Young guns Mikayla O’Meara and Neveah Roberts will also join the Eagles’ A squad this season, moving their way up from juniors to seniors.

“They are in peak form, adding a lot of height and agility to the bookends as well, they will absolutely get a good look at the top end of the vote count in their first season of senior netball, which is super exciting for them and exciting to see what they can bring to the senior grades,” Harvey said.

Committing for another season is Megan Thorneycroft in the goal circle, Sarah Young

in the defence end, as well as Harvey herself, who is a dominant player in the midcourt.

“There is definitely a lot of change from last year, but we are pretty stoked with how everything is turning out and our annual returning faces, and they will all bring something to the table,” Harvey said.

“It is such a good group of girls on and off the court, and I’m just excited to see what 2024 can bring to the Mallee Eagles.”

FROM THE COACH

“I think this year with our A Res coming off a premiership in 2023, and also having a very strong looking B squad this year, we’ve got a lot of depth to facilitate the losses we had from last season.”

PLAYER TO WATCH

Kasey Torr: Returning to her home club this season, Torr’s wealth of experience and versatility on the court is going to be crucial to the Eagles. As a former coach at Quambatook, her directing both on and off the court will be a real asset, as well her own speed and agility.

INS & OUTS

INS: Leah McKenzie, Kasey Torr, Gemma Miller (Moulamein), Millie Saville, Annee Hinton, Ryley Purcell (Swan Hill).
OUTS: Kellie Walker (Hay), Meg Allen, Sonya Lorenzoni, Amelia Shannahan (Murrabit).



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Round 1 – April 13 Balranald v Kerang Tyntynder v Cohuna K. Barham v NNW United Woorinen v Swan Hill T. Manang v M. Eagles BYE – Lake Boga	Round 8 – June 1 Kerang v NNW United Lake Boga v Swan Hill Balranald v M. Eagles Tyntynder v T. Manang K. Barham v Woorinen BYE – Cohuna	Round 13 – July 20 Kerang v Balranald Cohuna v Tyntynder NNW United v K. Barham Swan Hill v Woorinen M. Eagles v T. Manang BYE – Lake Boga
Round 2 – April 20 Swan Hill v T. Manang NNW United v Woorinen (N) Cohuna v K. Barham Kerang v Tyntynder Lake Boga v Balranald BYE – M. Eagles	League Bye – June 8 – Kings Birthday Weekend Feature Match Tyntynder v Swan Hill (Round 10)	Round 14 – July 27 Balranald v K. Barham Lake Boga v Woorinen Cohuna v M. Eagles NNW United v Swan Hill T. Manang v Kerang BYE – Tyntynder
Round 3 – April 27 (ANZAC Round) Tyntynder v Lake Boga K. Barham v Kerang Woorinen v Cohuna T. Manang v NNW United M. Eagles v Swan Hill BYE – Balranald	Round 9 – June 15 (Pride Round) T. Manang v K. Barham M. Eagles v Tyntynder Swan Hill v Balranald NNW United v Lake Boga Cohuna v Kerang BYE – Woorinen	Round 15 – August 3 (Ribbon Round) M. Eagles v NNW United T. Manang v Cohuna (MNG) Woorinen v Kerang K. Barham v Lake Boga Tyntynder v Balranald BYE – Swan Hill
Round 4 – May 4 NNW United v M. Eagles Cohuna v T. Manang Kerang v Woorinen Lake Boga v K. Barham Balranald v Tyntynder BYE – Swan Hill	Round 10 – June 22 Lake Boga v Cohuna Balranald v NNW United K. Barham v M. Eagles Woorinen v T. Manang BYE – Kerang Tyntynder v Swan Hill (Played June 8)	Round 16 – August 10 Lake Boga v Tyntynder Kerang v K. Barham NNW United v T. Manang Swan Hill v M. Eagles BYE – Balranald, Woorinen, Cohuna
Round 5 – May 11 K. Barham v Balranald Woorinen v Lake Boga M. Eagles v Cohuna Swan Hill v NNW United BYE – Tyntynder, Kerang, T. Manang	Round 11 – June 29 M. Eagles v Woorinen Swan Hill v K. Barham NNW United v Tyntynder Cohuna v Balranald Kerang v Lake Boga BYE – T. Manang	Round 17 – August 17 Swan Hill v Cohuna M. Eagles v Kerang T. Manang v Lake Boga (MNG) Woorinen v Balranald K. Barham v Tyntynder BYE – NNW United
Round 6 – May 18 (Thanks Round) Cohuna v Swan Hill Kerang v M. Eagles Lake Boga v T. Manang Balranald v Woorinen Tyntynder v K. Barham BYE – NNW United	League BYE – July 6 School Holidays	Round 18 – August 24 Tyntynder v Woorinen Balranald v T. Manang Lake Boga v M. Eagles Kerang v Swan Hill Cohuna v NNW United BYE – K. Barham
Round 7 – May 25 Woorinen v Tyntynder T. Manang v Balranald M. Eagles v Lake Boga Swan Hill v Kerang NNW United v Cohuna BYE – K. Barham	Round 12 – July 13 (NAIDOC Round) T. Manang v Swan Hill (MNG) Woorinen v NNW United K. Barham v Cohuna Tyntynder v Kerang Balranald v Lake Boga BYE – M. Eagles	Finals: Qualifying Final, August 31 Elimination Final, September 1 2nd Semi Final, September 7 1st Semi Final, September 8 Preliminary Final, September 14 Grand Final, September 21

Round 1 – April 20 Hay v Murrabit Ultima v Moulamein Macorna v Wandella	Round 7 – June 1 Moulamein v Hay Macorna v Murrabit Ultima v Wandella	Round 12 – July 20 Hay v Moulamein Macorna v Murrabit Ultima v Wandella
Round 2 – April 27 (ANZAC Round) Moulamein v Hay Murrabit v Macorna Wandella v Ultima	League Bye – June 8 – Kings Birthday Weekend	Round 13 – July 27 Hay v Macorna Murrabit v Ultima Moulamein v Wandella
Round 3 – May 4 Macorna v Hay Ultima v Murrabit Wandella v Moulamein	Round 8 – June 15 (Pride Round) Hay v Macorna Murrabit v Ultima Wandella v Moulamein	Round 14 – August 3 (Ribbon Round) Macorna v Moulamein Wandella v Murrabit Ultima v Hay
Round 4 – May 11 Moulamein v Macorna Hay v Ultima Murrabit v Wandella	Round 9 – June 22 Macorna v Moulamein Hay v Ultima Murrabit v Wandella	Round 15 – August 10 Murrabit v Moulamein Ultima v Macorna Wandella v Hay
Round 5 – May 18 (Thanks Round) Moulamein v Murrabit Macorna v Ultima Hay v Wandella	Round 10 – June 29 Moulamein v Murrabit Ultima v Macorna Wandella v Hay	Round 16 – August 17 Hay v Murrabit Moulamein v Ultima Macorna v Wandella
Round 6 – May 25 Murrabit v Hay Ultima v Moulamein Wandella v Macorna	League BYE – School Holidays – July 6	Finals: 2nd Semi Final, August 24 1st Semi Final, August 25 Preliminary Final, August 31 Grand Final, September 7



Round 1 – April 13 Calivil United v MGYCW (R) Bridgewater v Newbridge Marong v Mitiamo B/L Serpentine v Pyramid Hill BYE – Inglewood	Round 8 – June 1 B/L Serpentine v MGYCW Bridgewater v Mitiamo Newbridge v Calivil United Inglewood v Pyramid Hill BYE – Marong	Round 14 – July 20 Inglewood v MGYCW Pyramid Hill v Mitiamo Marong v Calivil United B/L Serpentine v Bridgewater BYE – Newbridge
Round 2 – April 20 Newbridge v Marong Pyramid Hill v Calivil United Inglewood v B/L Serpentine MGYCW v Bridgewater (N) BYE – Mitiamo	League Bye – June 8 – Kings Birthday Weekend	Round 15 – July 27 Calivil United v B/L Serpentine MGYCW v Newbridge Bridgewater v Marong Mitiamo v Inglewood BYE – Pyramid Hill
Round 3 – April 27 (ANZAC Round) Bridgewater v Inglewood Marong v Pyramid hill B/L Serpentine v Newbridge Mitiamo v MGYCW BYE – Calivil United	Round 9 – June 15 Marong v Inglewood Mitiamo v Newbridge MGYCW v Pyramid Hill Calivil United v Bridgewater BYE – B/L Serpentine	Round 16 – August 3 Marong v MGYCW B/L Serpentine v Mitiamo Inglewood v Calivil United Newbridge v Pyramid Hill BYE – Bridgewater
Round 4 – May 4 Pyramid Hill v Bridgewater Marong v B/L Serpentine Inglewood v Newbridge Calivil United v Mitiamo BYE – MGYCW	Round 10 – June 22 MGYCW v Calivil United Newbridge v Bridgewater Mitiamo v Marong Pyramid Hill v B/L Serpentine BYE – Inglewood	Round 17 – August 10 MGYCW v B/L Serpentine Mitiamo v Bridgewater Calivil United v Newbridge Pyramid Hill v Inglewood BYE – Marong
Round 5 – May 11 MGYCW v Inglewood Mitiamo v Pyramid Hill Calivil United v Marong Bridgewater v B/L Serpentine BYE – Newbridge	Round 11 – June 29 Bridgewater v MGYCW Marong v Newbridge Calivil United v Pyramid Hill B/L Serpentine v Inglewood BYE – Mitiamo	Round 18 – August 17 Inglewood v Marong Newbridge v Mitiamo Pyramid Hill v MGYCW Bridgewater v Calivil United BYE – B/L Serpentine
Round 6 – May 18 B/L Serpentine v Calivil United Newbridge v MGYCW Marong v Bridgewater Inglewood v Mitiamo BYE – Pyramid Hill	Round 12 – July 6 Inglewood v Bridgewater Pyramid Hill v Marong Newbridge v B/L Serpentine MGYCW v Mitiamo BYE – Calivil United	Finals: Qualifying Final, August 24 Elimination Final, August 25 2nd Semi Final, August 31 1st Semi Final, September 1 Preliminary Final, September 7 Grand Final, September 14
Round 7 – May 25 (Reconciliation Round) MGYCW v Marong Mitiamo v B/L Serpentine Calivil United v Inglewood Pyramid Hill v Newbridge BYE – Bridgewater	Round 13 – July 13 Bridgewater v Pyramid Hill B/L Serpentine v Marong Newbridge v Inglewood Mitiamo v Calivil United BYE – MGYCW	

Round 1 – April 13 SL-Nandaly v Boort St Arnaud v Wedderburn Donald v Wyche-Narra Nullawil v Birch-Watch BYE – Charlton	Round 7 – June 1 Charlton v Donald SL-Nandaly v St Arnaud Boort v Nullawil Wedderburn v Birch-Watch BYE – Wyche-Narra	Round 14 – July 20 Birch-Watch v Charlton Nullawil v SL-Nandaly Donald v St Arnaud Wyche-Narra v Boort BYE – Wedderburn
Round 2 – April 20 Boort v Charlton Wedderburn v SL-Nandaly Wyche-Narra v St Arnaud Birch-Watch v Donald BYE – Nullawil	Round 8 – June 8 (Kings Birthday) St Arnaud v Charlton Donald v Boort Nullawil v Wedderburn Birch-Watch v Wyche-Narra BYE – SL-Nandaly	Round 15 – July 27 Charlton v Nullawil SL-Nandaly v Donald Boort v Birch-Watch Wedderburn v Wyche-Narra BYE – St Arnaud
Round 3 – April 27 Charlton v Wedderburn SL-Nandaly v Wyche-Narra St Arnaud v Birch-Watch Donald v Nullawil BYE – Boort	Round 9 – June 15 Charlton v SL-Nandaly Boort v St Arnaud Wedderburn v Donald Wyche-Narra v Nullawil BYE – Birch-Watch	Round 16 – August 3 Donald v Charlton St Arnaud v SL-Nandaly Nullawil v Boort Birch-Watch v Wedderburn BYE – Wyche-Narra
Round 4 – May 4 Wyche-Narra v Charlton Birch-Watch v SL-Nandaly Nullawil v St Arnaud Wedderburn v Boort BYE – Donald	Round 10 – June 22 Boort v SL-Nandaly Wedderburn v St Arnaud Wyche-Narra v Donald Birch-Watch v Nullawil BYE – Charlton	Round 17 – August 10 Charlton v St Arnaud Boort v Donald Wedderburn v Nullawil Wyche-Narra v Birch-Watch BYE – SL-Nandaly
Round 5 – May 11 Charlton v Birch-Watch SL-Nandaly v Nullawil St Arnaud v Donald Boort v Wyche-Narra BYE – Wedderburn	Round 11 – June 29 Charlton v Boort SL-Nandaly v Wedderburn St Arnaud v Wyche-Narra Donald v Birch-Watch BYE – Nullawil	Round 18 – August 17 SL-Nandaly v Charlton St Arnaud v Boort Donald v Wedderburn Nullawil v Wyche-Narra BYE – Birch-Watch
Hockey Weekend Bye – May 18	Round 12 – July 6 Wedderburn v Charlton Wyche-Narra v SL-Nandaly Birch-Watch v St Arnaud Nullawil v Donald BYE – Boort	Finals: 1st Semi Final, August 24 2nd Semi Final, August 31 Preliminary Final, September 7 Grand Final, September 14
Round 6 – May 25 Nullawil v Charlton Donald v SL-Nandaly Birch-Watch v Boort Wyche-Narra v Wedderburn BYE – St Arnaud	Round 13 – July 13 Charlton v Wyche-Narra SL-Nandaly v Birch-Watch St Arnaud v Nullawil Boort v Wedderburn BYE – Donald	

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JOURNEYS of the heart



Kennedy's Showcase Jewellers

SENT ON PAGE 44



JOURNEYS
of the heart



Kennedy's Showcase
Jewellers

Nyah-Nyah West United



NETBALL FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1997. **COURT:** Nyah Recreation Reserve. **PREMIERSHIPS:** None.
A GRADE COACH: Madison Jones. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** 8th.
2023 BEST & FAIREST: Taylen Blachford.



Shania Decker in action for the Demons last season.
 Picture: Nick Moseley

NYAH-Nyah West United will take to the court with a new-look A Grade side this season, hoping to quickly gel as a cohesive unit to give themselves the best chance at a high ladder finish.

The first big change is the appointment of Madison Jones as A Grade coach, taking over from Laura Anderson.

Jones is a long-time player at the Demons, and her knowledge and expertise of the game will be an advantage for her team.

The Demons had an ordinary year in 2023, able to get five wins throughout the year, finishing the season in eighth place – down two positions compared to a year earlier.

“I think the girls obviously know how we went last year, but they are excited for some new players, some new ideas, and they are also pretty determined to have a better year than last year,” Jones said.

“It was pretty disappointing with a few injuries and then losing some players, it was a bit disheartening, but I think they are excited to come back stronger.”

While Jones is keen to be taking on the role of A Grade coach for the first time, she may have a bit of a challenge ahead of her in creating a solid team, with a lot of new faces joining the line-up.

Last year’s club best-and-fairest Taylen Blachford will be back in the GK/GD bib again, with her height and ability in the ring a massive asset to the Demons. Shooter Steph Henson will also return, as well as Lucy Millard in the midcourt.

But all three of these players will be forming new combinations, with shooter Bridie Curran, defender Aleesha Flanagan and midcourter Shania Decker all not playing A Grade this season. The Demons will also be without former coach Anderson and Jones herself on the court, both recovering from knee injuries sustained last season.

Taking their places, 2023 A Reserve players Shania Kelly and Chloe Threadgold have been elevated to A Grade, while new recruit Sarah Gaskin is set to join Henson in the Demons’ attack end.

Former club best-and-fairest Matika Mitchell will also return this season after a brief stint at Moulamein last year, where she

took home the Golden Rivers league best-and-fairest award despite missing the first few rounds of the season.

Mitchell’s ability as a defender and experience of the game will be a great asset to the Demons, particularly as they try to form those bonds all across the court.

“I have very high hopes for these girls. I think they deserve to have some success out on the court, and I really think that they can do it,” Jones said.

“They have a lot of potential to do well this year.”

FROM THE COACH

“We’ve had quite a big swap-up this year. We have only got a couple of girls from the team last year. It will take a bit to settle in I guess, but I’m really excited for the new inclusions.”

PLAYER TO WATCH

Matika Mitchell: Mitchell looks set to be a leader on the court for the Demons this season. Her wealth of netball knowledge, as well as her skills and ability, will be just what they need, and could be what gets them over the line in the end.

INS & OUTS

INS: Matika Mitchell (Moulamein), Sarah Gaskin.

OUTS: Madison Jones, Laura Anderson, Bridie Curran, Aleesha Flanagan, Shania Decker.



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Swan Hill

NETBALL
FAST
FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1997. **COURT:** Swan Hill Recreation Reserve. **PREMIERSHIPS:** 10 (2003, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2013, 2014, 2023). **A GRADE COACH:** Madeleine Nalder, Kelsey McCoy, Mollie Quin. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** Premiers. **2023 BEST & FAIREST:** Zoe Morris.



Carly-Marie Clark will return to the Swans' defence end in 2024. Picture: Phoebe Doyle

SWAN Hill's 2023 premiership win was one for the ages – an emotionally charged, physically draining victory that will long live in the memories of everyone who took to the court that day.

But despite the hype of their success, premiership-winning coach Madeleine Nalder said it was not something she wanted her team to take with them into the new season, preferring to leave the past in the past.

"To be honest, I sort of feel like, from our perspective, that was last year, and that was amazing, but this year is a new year," she said.

"We will be a different team, we will be playing against different competition, so what has gone on in previous years, I wouldn't say it's irrelevant, but it's a new year, so we can't dwell on past successes."

Coaching alongside Kelsey McCoy and Mollie Quin again this season, Nalder's main focus at the moment is building a new, unified team that will give them the best chance at a back-to-back premiership.

The Swans will be without best-on-court premiership player Ingrid Condely, whose smarts in the goal circle will be sorely missed. Kelsey McCoy, although coaching, will be sidelined this season as well after suffering a devastating ACL injury during the grand final match.

"Obviously all those girls that won't be playing in our side or at our club from last year is a huge loss, but with that comes opportunity for us – for other players to step up, for juniors to get an opportunity, and for us to start to move in a different direction as a club," Nalder said.

"Although they are obviously big shoes to fill with lots of the players that aren't going to be taking the court in 2024, but it's a great opportunity for us as a club to build something new and give more opportunity."

One of the new players the Swans have recruited is former Moulamein coach and Balranald premiership player Stevie Bibby, who will be a great asset to the defence end.

Most of the rest of last year's premiership-winning team will return to the court in 2024, bringing with them years of experience and a high level of skills. This will include Kelly Bonney, Karli McIntyre, Zoe Morris, Carly-Marie Clark and, of course, Nalder herself.

A number of the Swans junior players will

also be joining the senior ranks this season, such as Peyton Cutrell, Gabby Atkinson and Ella Vrolijk.

As the final weeks of pre-season loomed, Nalder was looking to start working on the new combinations that would form across the court, wanting her team to be as put-together as possible by round 1.

"I guess everyone who plays team sports, we all want to play on grand final day, I feel like that is why we do it," Nalder said.

"But really, we're just trying to focus on cementing what we are doing and who we've got and trying to build a really good culture, squad and group early on to take us into the 2024 season."

FROM THE COACH

"It's still a busy time of year for lots of people in that changeover period, but we're excited about the 2024 season and what that will look like and what they will bring."

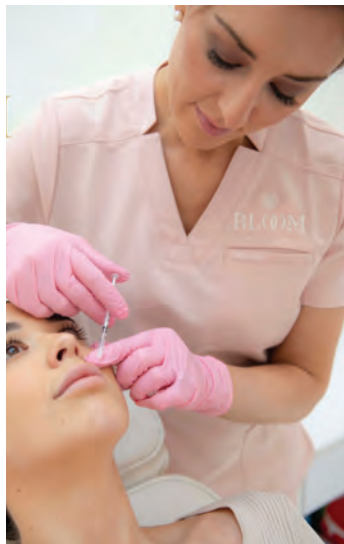
PLAYER TO WATCH

Zoe Morris: Returning to the Swans in great style last season, taking home a premiership and a best and fairest, Morris will again be a key component of her team's line-up, and certainly one to watch in the goal circle.

INS & OUTS

INS: Stevie Bibby (Moulamein), Paris Stewart, Jade Hunter, Skye Kelly (Woorinen), Emily Fasham (Koondrook-Barham).

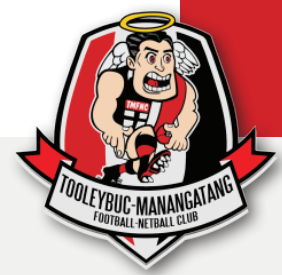
OUTS: Ingrid Condely, Kelsey McCoy.



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Tooleybuc-Manangatang



NETBALL FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1997. **COURT:** Tooleybuc Recreation Reserve. **PREMIERSHIPS:** None.
A GRADE COACH: Melanie Wait. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** 10th.
2023 BEST & FAIREST: Summer Blachford.



Tooleybuc-Manangatang shooter Shaniah Nunn lines up a shot last season.
 Picture: Phoebe Doyle

DESPITE finishing 10th on the ladder last season, Tooleybuc-Manangatang are starting the new year with an optimistic attitude, with their eye on being one of the final five teams.

The Saints didn't have the best 2023, only managing to get two wins and one draw – highlights being a 13-goal win against Cohuna in round 6, a 41-goal win against Koondrook-Barham in round 10, and a 48-all draw against Tyntynder in the last round.

But after a mass exodus at the end of 2022, coach Melanie Wait viewed last year as a development year, taking the time to build on the new combinations found all over the court.

"I think just in the 12 months, to consolidate all the hard work that we have already done, I think will see us make big gains," Wait said.

"We've had 12 months, had the experience, they are no longer overawed, they are ready and up for the challenge."

Returning to the court for the Saints this year will be defenders Taylah Morris and Olivia Fowler, while best and fairest Summer Blachford will be in the goal circle once again. They will have pocket rocket Jayda Plant running through the midcourt.

The Saints will also have Laura Grant returning from maternity leave, bringing plenty of experience, class and athleticism to their defence end.

Grant will be a tremendous asset for the younger members of the team, able to be a leader on the court and give them guidance when needed.

Plant and Fowler will both be playing two games a week, as they both still qualify for under-17s.

However, this would be nothing new for the youngsters, who filled in quite often in A Grade last season, and Wait believed they would rise to the challenge.

"I think this will be really exciting to see how they go now that they are experienced, and they are starting to grow and develop as a netballers in their own right," Wait said.

"Jayda and Liv have just had really strong performances at the state titles, so they are coming off some good netball already, and they are ready to start the year strong."

Wait said that overall, she was excited to be back working with a great group of girls again, and keen to see what 2024 had in store

for the Saints.

"We've got plenty of numbers and depth in our senior netball, and we've just been doing a fair bit of work on general skills and consistency across the four grades, as well as expectation and skills," she said.

FROM THE COACH

"I would like to think that we will be a finalist team. I think that we have got some really good depth, and we will work really hard – that will be our goal."

PLAYER TO WATCH

Jayda Plant: Despite being one of the youngest in the team, Plant plays a pivotal role in the Saints' midcourt. She is energetic and agile, often able to run out her opponents with her quick bursts up and down the court.

INS & OUTS

INS: Laura Grant.
OUTS: None.

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Tyntynder



NETBALL FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1997. **COURT:** Alan Garden Reserve. **PREMIERSHIPS:** 9 (1997, 1998, 2001, 2002, 2004, 2008, 2011, 2017, 2018). **A GRADE COACH:** Kelsey Rowe. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** 7th. **2023 BEST & FAIREST:** Kelsey Rowe.



Tyntynder's playing coach Kelsey Rowe is hoping to move up the ladder this season. Picture: Phoebe Doyle

ON the cusp of really finding their rhythm at the end of last season, Tyntynder are hoping this year will find them in the final five.

Taking over the reins from Tegan Lawry as head coach, 2023 club best-and-fairest and former premiership player Kelsey Rowe has wasted no time in getting her team season-fit, focusing heavily on putting in the hard yards earlier in the year to better set themselves up for success.

"We know what it is like to miss out on a finals spot, so we need to be a bit more hungry to get more wins on the board," Rowe said.

"In pre-season, we have focused on that, that we needed to put in some work a bit earlier on in the season if we do want to go further than what we did last year.

"The girls have all taken that on board and done that. We are definitely putting in the hard work now and hoping that that will have a good outcome towards the end of the year."

Although the Dogs only got five wins and one draw on the board last year, they were sporting a relatively fresh-faced line-up that began to work more cohesively the further the season went on.

This year, most of that line-up will return, including dynamic defending duo Bridget Dedini and Nichola Milano, as well as midcourter Demi Hallam.

Shooter Tess Denham is also set to return to the court after being sidelined with an injury last season.

Last year's A Reserve best and fairest Brigitte King and runner-up Elvie Kelly-Britten have also been elevated to the Dogs' A Grade team this season.

"I think they bring new elements to the team, which hopefully has a positive impact for us as well," Rowe said of her teammates.

King will be providing an extra layer of depth to the Dogs' defence end, with her height and skill in reading the play making her a very dominant player, while Kelly-Britten's expertise should mean she slots rights back into their A Grade side.

However, the Dogs will be without the "leadership and expertise" of Toni Rivett this year, with the talented midcourter departing the club to play at Hay.

While a key goal for the Dogs was to be more competitive overall this season,

Rowe said the vibe off the court was just as important this year.

"Everyone wants to play finals, so that is definitely a goal. But I think, beyond that, we just want to improve and build on each week, and more importantly have a really good season off the court socially," she said.

"We want to have some fun and make it a year to remember."

FROM THE COACH

"The vibe around the netball courts is unreal, and we're getting such good numbers, and I think that is a reflection of building that club culture as well."

PLAYER TO WATCH

Elvie Kelly-Britten: After playing A Res last season, returning to netball after an injury, Kelly-Britten will be a welcome addition to Tyntynder's midcourt. Her experience and clever play will help direct her teammates on the court. Her speed and agility is also second to none.

INS & OUTS

INS: Tamara Weiss, Taylah Woodward (Pyramid Hill), Tess Denham
OUTS: Toni Rivett (Hay), Nikita Morrison, Jade Featherby (Ultima)

br
BROAD REALTY

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Woorinen



NETBALL FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1997. **COURT:** Woorinen Recreation Reserve. **PREMIERSHIPS:** 3 (2005, 2016, 2019).
A GRADE COACH: Tayla Bennett. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** Semi-finalist.
2023 BEST & FAIREST: Tessa Demaria.



Tigers young gun Ava Crow will take the court in A Grade again this season. Picture: Noel Fisher

WOORINEN will be giving their talented juniors a “red hot crack” in 2024, eager to build on the hard work of the club over the past few seasons, as well as helping secure future successes.

While their home-and-away season included some of the top performances across the league last year, such as being the only team to beat minor premiers Lake Boga in round 17, the Tigers struggled in the finals series, eventually knocked out by the Mallee Eagles in the semi-final.

But Tigers coach Tayla Bennett said they won't take much of that into the new year, instead focusing on creating a new, cohesive team.

“I suppose we reflected as a group at the end of that home-and-away season last year, we knew what we had done wrong,” she said.

“We are just starting fresh and with kind of the same goals as we had last year, but obviously a lot more will need to go into forming all of those bonds with the newbies.

“A team is not just about each other's talents, there is a lot of bonding.

“I would say that wins a premiership over skill these days – how well the team can work together on and off the court.”

The Tigers' A Grade line-up will look a bit different than last season, with Carlee Hazlett sidelined with knee injury and shooter Emily Siely having a baby.

Also expecting a baby, Bennett herself is set to be coaching from the sidelines. She said that while she was disappointed she wouldn't be taking to the court herself, it would give her a new perspective.

“You will definitely see me pacing, I don't know how I'm really going to go ... I normally don't cope very well when I have no control,” she said.

“I think it will give me a new challenge being off the court, and I think it is probably about time that I have new challenge in that regard of stepping up and coaching and being able to spread my time a bit more, especially with overseeing some other grades, as normally you just don't get that opportunity while playing.”

Filling in those gaps in the team will be 15-year-old pocket rocket Ava Crow, who became an integral part of the Tigers midcourt last season. Bennett will also look to Tiger cubs Willow Conlan, Eva Boulton and Olivia

Free during the season.

The young players will be aided by the experience and expertise of club legend Tessa Demaria in the defence end, as well as Jaimee Beasy through the midcourt.

The club will also welcome back Nikki Trenfield.

“We're going with the term of one wise head in each third,” Bennett said.

“I think it's time that we give these kids a red hot crack at it, because they are our future now, so let's start encouraging them and guiding them now.

“There is so much knowledge sitting on the sideline for once.

“For myself, it is hard to tell Willow or Ava what to do when I'm on the court with them, so being able to sit on the sideline and give more guidance and reassurance, I feel like they will come a lot further that way.”

FROM THE COACH

“Across the board this year we are making sure we are consistent across all grades, so I feel like that is probably our goal - creating consistency and creating our little Woorinen community to be positive and to really upskill our players and upskill our coaching and bring everything together.”

PLAYER TO WATCH

Ava Crow: Although on the shorter side in stature, 15-year-old pocket rocket Crow is a weapon in the Tigers midcourt. She has a head for netball, is able to read the play, and strategically position herself up and down the court.

INS & OUTS

INS: Nikki Trenfield.

OUTS: Emily Siely, Tayla Bennett, Stacey Pearce, Carlee Hazlett.





Golden Rivers Football & Netball



Hay's drought-breaking premiership has them entering the season as reigning premiers for the first time since 1996.
Picture: Nick Moseley



In a dominant display from start to finish, Murrabit successfully defended the Golden River A-grade netball premiership, defeating Macorna by 11 goals.
Picture: Noel Fisher

Changing fortunes in Golden Rivers

FOR the first time in just under 30 years, the Hay Football Club prepare to run out to face their Golden Rivers opponents as reigning premiers.

The drought-breaking premiership, the Lions' first since 1995, was the cherry on top of a fairytale finals run for the eventual premiers, as they came from third to win it all.

The Lions' dominant finals performances shone a light on a fact the league's competitors are well aware of; that on their day, any team

can win in the Golden Rivers.

Murrabit's disappointing year in senior football was soon an afterthought, as their triumphant A-grade netball side defeated Macorna in their grand final match-up.

An interesting piece of trivia from the 2023 season is the contrasting fortunes of the clubs.

Hay won the senior football premiership while their A Grade netball team finished last.

Murrabit won the A Grade netball premiership while their senior football team

finished last.

As teams throughout the league strengthen on the field and the courts, each premier will be aware there is a target on their backs.

Ultima and Macorna will both be hoping to go one step further this season in senior football and netball respectively, but any challenger can make a run.

Moulamein were there and abouts in both sports last year and will be hoping 2024 is the year they break their premiership drought.

With the local talent spread across just six Golden Rivers clubs, there is always the chance for an unexpected challenger to emerge.

Hay have spent the off-season with a focus on strengthening their netball side, and will be hoping for an improved showing.

Wandella and Murrabit will be looking to re-enter the fray and make the finals this year.

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Hay



FOOTY FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1981. **GROUND:** Hay Park. **PREMIERSHIPS:** 4 (1982, 1992, 1995, 2023).
PRESIDENT: George Auldish. **SENIOR COACHES:** Mick Cattnach and Jason Aylett.
2023 LADDER POSITION: 3rd (premiers).

SEVEN months after breaking their 28-year premiership drought, there is only one question on the minds on Hay's supporters: Can the Lions go back-to-back?

A 29-point victory against last season's ladder-toppers Ultima was the culmination of Hay making it through the gauntlet of a tough finals campaign, after finishing the season in third place.

Premiership coach Mick Cattnach said the dreaded premiership hangover was something that was hard to ignore coming into the season.

"Just sitting here as a coach prior to the season, I think you do consider the premiership hangover."

"Hay's won very few premierships and has never won back-to-back premierships, so the odds are heavily against us at that level."

"But I think once the season starts, I think we'll just get going, even if it takes us two or three games."

The inclusion of a handful of players from Northern Territory side Waratahs provided the Lions with fresh blood, and was headlined by midfielder Will Clark.

Clark rewarded the Lions with a scintillating finals series, being named best afield in the grand final for a performance that included two goals.

But the Lions will be searching for consecutive flags without a handful of those Darwin recruits, with Clark, Dom Booth and Luke Arandt not returning this season.

The young cubs at the Lions will need to be ready to roar into 2024. Last year's Golden Rivers Rookie of the Year Jensen Hargreaves proved to be a strong contributor at senior level.

A raft of re-signings is headlined by the return of star forward Declan Watson.



Often starting on the wing, Tom Spence provides the Lions with strong line-breaking ability and an abundance of effort.
 Picture: Nick Moseley

Watson was an unstoppable force for the Lions in the 11 games he played, which included all three finals.

While the inclusions aren't as many as their fellow contenders, Hay's additions could have a big impact quickly.

A solid combination of size and speed, the addition of Bentley Murphy from Wollongong will provide a strong body that can play across the ground, as will new player Christian Foster.

The Lions will be desperate to prove that last year's premiership wasn't dependent on the fairytale storyline, and will be hoping it's the signal of a period of dominance.

"We'll just be one of six teams trying to be competitive week in, week out," Cattnach said.

"I would imagine once we get into the season, the focus won't be on what happened in 2023, it'll be all about what's happening in '24."

FROM THE COACH

"Last year was just fantastic, we feel pretty lucky that everything just fell into place for us. We were seen as a reasonable side last year, but we weren't really seen as that primary contender."

"This year will be much different; I don't think we will be sneaking up on anyone this year."

"Hay hasn't entered a season like this in a long time, so it could be a bit of a challenge for our younger players and even our more experienced guys."

"I don't think we will change much, it's all about seeing our players continue to develop."

KEY PLAYER

Declan Watson: The leading goal kicker for the Golden Rivers league with finals contributions included, Watson will again be the spearhead of the Lions' attack.

Kicking a total of 53 goals across his 11 matches last year, Watson has unrivalled contested-marking ability and has the set-shot ability to match.

Watson's presence allows Hay's smaller forwards to thrive, consistently taking on the opponents' best defender.

INS & OUTS

INS: Christian Foster, Bentley Murphy (Wollongong Bulldogs), Jacob Watson, Joel Crocker (Darwin).

OUTS: Simon Bunyan (retired), Clint Brunnenmeyer (Bullioh), Daniel Gash (retired), Will Clarke (Ballarat), Luke Arandt (Cairns), Dom Booth (Cairns).

NETBALL

THE Hay Lions are aiming to improve on last season with the recruitment of talented players Kellie Walker, Toni Rivett and Maddie Mannes.

Coach Lani Houston, who will take the reins for the fourth season running, is excited about her new players.

"Toni Rivett and Kellie Walker are exceptional additions to our netball squad with not only strong

netball skills but great leadership," she said.

Hay finished the 2023 season at the bottom of the ladder, winning just one game for the season.

The club is hopeful they will turn their luck around this year.

"We are really aiming for A Grade to make finals this year and potentially a premiership," Houston said.

INS & OUTS

INS: Kellie Walker (Mallee Eagles), Toni Rivett (Tyntynder), Maddie Mannes (Berrigan), Ruby Stewart.

OUTS: Ruby Cattnach, Emma Johnston, Katie Howard, Elle Jamieson.

PLAYER TO WATCH

Olivia Joyce: "Her intercepting ability and capacity to read the game, picking off passes into the goal circle is brilliant," Houston said.

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Macorna

FOOTY FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1945. **GROUND:** Macorna Recreation Reserve. **PREMIERSHIPS:** 8 (1947, 1948, 1951, 1952, 1953, 1960, 1962, 1970). **PRESIDENT:** Greg Whinfield. **SENIOR COACHES:** Scott Wishart and Paul Longstaff. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** 4th (lost to Hay in first semi-final).



THE addition of powerful key-position players was a strong focus at Macorna over the off-season, who already have the capacity to win the hard ball but lacked direction.

Last year's Golden Rivers Most Valuable Player Lachlan Ritchie and fellow midfielder Shaun Haffenden were big contributors to Macorna's campaign but were often asked to fill positions across the ground.

The decision to move Ritchie to a forward position paid off, though, the Tiger leading his side in goal kicking with 34, which included a big bag of eight in round four.

With Haffenden leaving the club, and young midfielder Jack Featherby making the move to Moulamein, Macorna's additions have focused on big-bodied midfielders with the ability to run up forward.

"Last year, we had a few injury concerns around our big guys," said coach Scott Wishart.

"We just think this year we've got a few more to cover that area if we need to.

"We've also got a little bit more run and carry and probably a few more numbers that can go through our midfield."

The pairing of St Bede's Johnny Dawes and Huntly's Kurt Forder, who can both play in the ruck and forward or back respectively, adds strong support through the spine of the team.

The additions of Oscar Donn and Josh Macpherson from UTS Bats add extra skill to the Tigers midfield, while the return of Macorna junior Laing Whinfield will have supporters excited.

The poles of Josh Cameron and Malcom Neiwand may find themselves sharing time between forward and on-ball, as the new recruits make their impact.

Key defender and runner-up in Macorna's best-and-fairest, Nick Ingleton, will be important again as he holds down the Tigers' backline.



Malcolm Neiwand will be another key performer in Macorna's midfield unit, as the Tigers look to venture further into the finals. Picture: Maryke de Villiers

backline.

But he will have fresh support from the likes of Forder and Travis Mercadante, who has the ability to play all across the ground.

Having scraped into the finals last year in fourth position, Macorna will be hoping their new recruits gel quickly and see them up the

ladder.

Macorna closed out 2023 with a 90-point semi-final loss to eventual premiers, Hay, and will be looking to venture further into the finals.

But as clubs around them strengthen, the Tigers will need things to go their way if they want to be there at the end of finals.

FROM THE COACH

"We don't want to put a ceiling on our guys, and will back them in and give them every opportunity to be as good as they can. We think that if we play somewhere near our best, we will be near the pointy end of things.

"We know that on your day, you can beat anyone else in the league.

"I think we were pretty good around the footy last year, and that's what Macorna is known for; being a tough, hard club to play against. We think we've got a pretty good spread of players coming in, so we will have a bit of a better balanced squad this year."

KEY PLAYER:

Lachlan Ritchie: The Swiss Army knife of Macorna's side, Ritchie was well rewarded for last year's performance with the league's MVP award in his second year at the Tigers' den.

Having played in the NEAFL and QAFL, Ritchie has immense experience and brings others up to his level.

Having spent time up forward, in defence and even in the ruck, Ritchie is known for his overhead marking ability.

INS & OUTS

INS: Koby Gibson (Huntly), Travis Mercadante (Huntly), Kurt Forder (Huntly), Damian Kitchingman (Maldon), Josh Macpherson (UTS Bats), Oscar Donn (UTS Bats), Laing Whinfield (Cowra), Johnny Dawes (St Bede's).

OUTS: Jack Featherby (Moulamein), Shaun Haffenden.

NETBALL

AFTER losing the grand final last year, Macorna are out to redeem themselves this season.

However, coach Tiff Bartram knows it will be no easy feat to back up their season with another grand final berth.

"Obviously we are hoping to go one better this year, but we know how hard it will be," Bartram said.

"We have recruited really well for our top two grades and hope it's enough, however we know Murrabit have also boosted their stocks."

The Tigers have been training since February and have large numbers for all of their senior grades.

INS & OUTS

INS: Kelly Rayson (Leitchville Gunbower), Meiha Burns (Leitchville Gunbower), Ava Treacy (Leitchville Gunbower) Lilly Robinson (Cohuna Kangas) Zoe Stewart (Leitchville Gunbower). **OUTS:** Lee Hardie, Jasmine Williams.



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Moulamein



FOOTY FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1958. **GROUND:** Moulamein South Recreation Reserve. **PREMIERSHIPS:** 2 (1961, 1988). **PRESIDENT:** Neville Willox. **SENIOR COACH:** Shane Featherby. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** 2nd (knocked out of preliminary final by Hay).

MOULAMEIN head into the 2024 season after an off-season that Swans fans hope will reinvigorate the club.

A raft of new players have joined the Swans, after a preliminary-final exit last season at the hands of the eventual premiers.

Another side set to benefit from a Central Murray exodus, the Swans have positions to fill after just as many players left the club as they had signed.

The losses of onballer Luke Shannon and centre half-back Andy Silva to Moorabbin Kangaroos are big losses for the Swans, who will need their new signings to make an immediate impact.

The signings weren't restricted to just on-field as Shane (Ted) Featherby was named as the man at the helm for 2024, making the move from Tyntynder to replace Heath Moloney as senior coach.

The move is set to free up Moloney, who although ineligible due to suspension, was the leading vote-getter in last year's EG Hunt Medal and is one of the league's most dominant in his position.

A towering ruckman, Moloney's tap-work enables his midfield to get their hands to the footy, but he will have new teammates at his feet this season.

Tough and experienced on-baller Andrew May is a strong addition to the midfield group, while Keana Hall's move from Mathoura adds more strength.

Making the move from Macorna to join up with his father Shane, Moulamein fans will have to wait a year to see Jack Featherby run out due to injury.

Hunter and Xander Huntland join the club from Lake Boga, with Hunter adding strength as a key position defender, who will be supported by ex-Deni Rovers addition Will Martin.

Speedy small forward Bailey Caruso will add some craft in attack, while Trae Atkinson



Former Swans coach Heath Moloney can focus on his work on the ground, and provide Moulamein with a game-changing presence.
Picture: Nick Moseley

will bring run from the wing or half-forward.

They will need to find the goals to replace the 66 goals that outgoing players Andy Silva and Daniel Aarsman scored last year.

Having finished the 2023 season two games

clear in second place, the Swans know that they have what it takes to be there at the pointy end of the season.

The question remains if the off-season overhaul will be a little too much, too fast.

FROM THE COACH:

Did not respond.

KEY PLAYER

Amos Farrell: Pacey and hard-nosed, Farrell provides the Swans midfield with skill.

The ability to switch between midfield and forward duties with no change in his impact.

Holds good value as a goalkicker, having kicked 25 last year, including a bag of six in round 6.

Consistently one of the Swans' best players, Farrell's impact to his side is rarely matched.

INS & OUTS

INS: Bailey Caruso (Deniliquin Rovers), Keana Hall (Mathoura), Shane Featherby (Tyntynder), Andrew May (Deniliquin Rovers), Mark Drotsky (Lake Boga), Mitchell Ryan (Lake Boga), Hunter Hartland (Lake Boga), Xander Hartland (Lake Boga), Jack Featherby (Tyntynder).

OUTS: Luke Shannon (Moorabbin Kangaroos) Andy Silva (Moorabbin Kangaroos), Anthony Daw (Deer Park), Jesse Wilson (Mallee Eagles), Daniel Mitchell (Lake Boga), Dawson Prange (Mallee Eagles), Nickolas Miller (Mallee Eagles).

NETBALL

MOULAMEIN A Grade midcourter Courtney Atkins is upbeat about the Swans' season, despite the team not yet having an A Grade coach.

"Our A Grade side is going to be great, we have a young gun named Zarlie Featherby from Tyntynder and Maddy Gleeson from Lake

Boga to add to our team," Atkins said.

Despite finishing third in 2023, their season was inconsistent, losing winnable games close to the end of the year.

The Swans have also lost the formidable Matika Mitchell, who won the Golden Rivers A Grade league medal in 2023.

INS & OUTS

INS: Zarlie Featherby (Tyntynder) Maddy Gleeson (Lake Boga)

OUTS: Maddison Wild, Matika Mitchell, Sarah Jane Carmichael.

PLAYER TO WATCH

Maddy Gleeson: Playing in Lake Boga's A Reserve team in 2023, Maddy makes the change to Moulamein this season. Maddy is a fit and agile defender who will be a welcome addition to the Swans line-up, with the loss of Matika Mitchell.



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Murrabit

FOOTY FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1947. **GROUND:** Murrabit Recreation Reserve. **PREMIERSHIPS:** 12 (1949, 1958, 1963, 1965, 1966, 1967, 1968, 1969, 1999, 2005, 2007, 2016). **PRESIDENT:** Neil Teasdale. **SENIOR COACH:** Jack Shannahan. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** 6th.



NEW coach Jack Shannahan steps into a Murrabit side where the only way is up, the Blues finishing last season planted firmly on the bottom of the ladder.

But a fresh coach brings fresh ideas and Shannahan has wasted no time in getting his players into that same mindset.

"There's a lot of new things," he said.

"Being a new coach, with new assistant coaches and quite a few new players; there's also a bit of a new game-style we are trying to introduce to the squad.

"It's given a little bit of rejuvenation to some of the guys who have been here for a while, but we're aware that it might take a bit of time for things to click."

And with the departure of star full forward Damian Cupido, comes new challenges and opportunities.

The challenges are obvious: who replaces the 52 goals that Cupido tallied last year, and will Murrabit find ways to share that load?

But the opportunities are endless, with new additions ready to step into the side and young stars ready to make their names.

Murrabit have strengthened across all lines, recruiting heavily from the Central Murray.

Shannahan said players like Dean Harrop, Austin McKerron and ex-Lake Boga recruits Ryan Harvey, Patrick Bryan and Beau Dooley strengthened local ties.

"We wanted to recruit good footy players, and good people with a focus on bringing in some local guys," he said.

"We will still probably have three or four guys who travel, but it's been great to see so many people at training."

A mix of experience and youth will run out for Murrabit, as Shannahan said Murrabit had put the work into their juniors in recent



Tobie Cameron's pace and skill gives him the ability to break a game apart. The speedster was one of the Blues' most consistent performers last year. Picture: Noel Fisher

times.

"It will be a young side, but there's also a pretty good mix of experienced guys as well.

"There's a lot of good young kids that are coming through now."

For Shannahan, the signs of an improved year ahead were already evident.

"We want to make things as simple as possible, and just have that plan on repeat during training," he said.

"It's important for us to build those good habits at training, and hopefully those habits shine through on the field in round 1."

KEY PLAYER

Nathan O'Toole: It's hard to look past the Blues' fearless leader as their most damaging player. Equal third in last year's MVP award, O'Toole's versatility is a valuable asset for his side. The big-bodied midfielder is lauded for his consistent effort and dogged attack on the ball. With the strength and ability to play all across the ground, O'Toole's line-breaking ability is integral to Murrabit's success.

FROM THE COACH

"Our aim, first and foremost, is to improve upon last year; We've got no other expectations than just improving. With it being a small, and fairly even competition, we feel like there is no reason why we can't compete with everyone.

"The last couple of years have really given Murrabit the chance to bring through some of our young kids. I've stepped into a team where a lot of these sixteen and seventeen-year-olds have already had a really good taste of senior football."

INS & OUTS

INS: Dean Harrop (NNWU), Patrick Bryan (Lake Boga), Ryan Harvey (Lake Boga), Jacob Wade (Mallee Eagles), Jack Shannahan (Mallee Eagles), Pras Sayakhot (Violet Town), Liam Holt-Fitz (PINT), Jordan Lampi (Violet Town), James Harvey (Lake Boga), Beau Dooley (Lake Boga), Austin McKerron (Woorinen), Brody Green (Maiden Gully).

OUTS: Ed Aujard (Newbridge), Jono Aujard (Newbridge), Michael Crossett (Anakie), Dustin Burns, Damian Cupido (Maryborough).

NETBALL

MURRABIT are primed to do the unthinkable this season, and win three A Grade premierships in a row.

The Blues have two new coaches at the helm, club stalwart Ashea Bujdoso and returning player Elly Bookham.

Emelia Shannahan also joins the reigning premiers and will add to their already strong attack end. Only dropping two games last

season, the Blues will definitely go into the season as the team to beat.

Bookham has run a well attended pre-season camp.

"We hope to bring new strategies to the club this year as well as some new faces," she said.

"We want to continue the good vibes that Murrabit netballers bring to each season."

INS & OUTS

INS: Elly Bookham (Mallee Eagles), Emilia Shannahan (Mallee Eagles), Steph Reeves (returning from injury). **OUTS:** Ashea Bujdoso.

PLAYER TO WATCH

Mila Bray: Mila had a taste of senior netball last season, playing in between A and B grades. Mila is an in-circle defender who can also play out at WD. Her best on-court performance in the B Grade grand final demonstrated her strength as a young defender.



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Ultima



FOOTY FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1979. **GROUND:** Ultima Recreation Reserve. **PREMIERSHIPS:** 10 (1981, 1983, 1991, 1994, 1996, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2014, 2015). **PRESIDENT:** Nathan Condely. **SENIOR COACH:** Kyle Symons. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** 1st, runners-up, lost to Hay in grand final.



Ultima's ever-dependable key defender Caillum Brady's lockdown ability is rivalled only by his intercept marking.

IT was a season of mixed emotions for the 2023 minor premiers; with the highs of the club returning to the top of the league and the low of a grand final defeat.

Ultima come into the 2024 season knowing that they have what it takes to beat any side, and with considerable work put into recruitment over the off-season.

The addition of six players from Central Murray teams Lake Boga and Tyntynder will bolster the already strong side, and add real depth.

Roos coach Kyle Symons said adding some strength through the midfield was the step that could take them one step further this year.

"We wanted to bring in a few more experienced heads, and some bigger bodies as well," he said.

"I think we've been able to do that quite well.

"We always try to keep a strong midfield, just because it can be a bit tough to find much of an advantage in the ruck.

"It's important to counteract that when the footy comes to ground.

The return of local youngster Tom Bell from Minyip-Murtoa is a key addition to an already top-tier midfield unit and has Roos supporters excited.

Mitch Seton-Stewart, Thomas Bull and Jake Foster headline the on-ballers who know how to win the footy.

Question marks surround how quickly the additions will gel with the existing squad, but they should quickly add more scoring threats to the Roos' forward line.

Captain-coach Kyle Symons was the

main goal threat for his side last year, with 25 goals in 16 games but Ultima will be hoping their midfielders and small forwards will provide scoring ability again this year.

Ultima's success this year hinges on how their side will bounce back after the disappointing loss in last year's final match.

Chasing their first premiership in nine years, and with just one loss in last year's home and away season, Ultima have proven that they could still be the team to beat in the Golden Rivers.

But without looking too far ahead, the Kangaroos will be aiming to do away with any post-season jitters and go one better this season.

FROM THE COACH

"We'll just focus on what we can do on the field now, last season is all in the past now.

"We know that we had a poor day on grand final day, but we know our best is good enough to beat anyone.

"The belief is there, we just need to build a tiny bit more confidence because it did take a little hit.

"Our big aim is to keep those defenders accountable and really force them to have to defend us.

"We've brought in a few guys over the off-season who we think will be able to give us a bit more, and we're expecting some improvement from the other guys."

KEY PLAYER

Tom Bull: Runner-up in last year's EG Hunt Medal, Bull lives up to his name on the field.

A classy midfielder who can run on the outside or win his own footy, Bull is key to the Roos' forays forward.

Dependable and quick-thinking, Bull is adept in disposal with either foot or handball and has the aerobic capacity to run all day.

INS & OUTS

INS: Tom Bell (Minyip-Murtoa), Matt Taverna (Lake Boga), Cameron Johnson (Lake Boga), Lincoln Frost (Lake Boga), Ricky Wild (Lake Boga), Ryan Featherby (Tyntynder), Brodie Bennett (Tyntynder).

OUTS: Brodie Cochrance (Swan Hill), Luke Doolan.

NETBALL

ULTIMA coach Tayla Foster was "blown away" with the turnout at her club's pre-season.

"The girls haven't missed a beat since mid January and it's been really nice to see the connection between the group coming together," she said.

Foster is hoping for her senior teams to go deep into finals after a disappointing end to 2024 season where A Grade

went out in the elimination final against Moulamein.

The Roos are very optimistic and excited that this season will bring more success and are keen to begin.

Losing Lily Grey, Kobe Davison and Grace Farrell, means Foster has a big job putting her team together, however, a number of new players are putting their hands up for selection.

INS & OUTS

INS: Madison Davies, Ashlea Johnson, Sam Taverna, Jenna Wild (Lake Boga), Jade Featherby (Tyntynder), Molly McGowan, Isis Davison (U17 coming up to seniors). **OUTS:** Lily Grey, Kobe Davison, Grace Farrell.

PLAYER TO WATCH

Jackelyn Burge: Jackelyn has put in a solid pre-season and was a big asset for Ultima in the second half of last season but unfortunately missed the Roos' finals campaign. A zippy midcourter, expect to see her linking with Foster in the Roos' midcourt.



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GO ROOS!

Wandella

FOOTY FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1945. **GROUND:** Wandella Recreation Reserve. **PREMIERSHIPS:** 14 (1955, 1956, 1957, 1959, 1977, 1979, 1985, 1986, 1993, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2017). **PRESIDENT:** Leigh Hollingworth. **SENIOR COACHES:** Adam Ward and Justin Robinson. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** 5th.



The experience of midfielder Tim Robinson is invaluable for Wandella's onball crew, with his ability to extract the footy and move it forward.
Picture: Noel Fisher



INS & OUTS

INS: John Cooper (Irymple), Troy Robinson (Therry Penola), Justin Robinson (Irymple), Connor Wilson (Chirside Park), Marius Clarke (St Mary's Darwin), Nathan Boysen (Kerang).
OUTS: Mitch Collins (Sunbury), Jake McGee (Mallee Eagles), Ricky Cathie (Newbridge), Bradley Delamare (Pyramid Hill), Timmins, Corey Walters.

AFTER a disappointing 2023 season, Wandella are champing at the bit to get back on course and return to finals football this year.

Having sat at the helm for two seasons, Logan Keighran will hand over the reins to midfielder Adam Ward and returning Wandella son Justin Robinson.

Robinson said it was "great to be back," as he returns after four seasons with Irymple, and brings with him another Robinson and a four-time premiership player, Troy.

It's those experienced players who will be crucial in bringing through some of the impressive junior talent the club has fostered.

"Our younger players are coming through from some successful years in the juniors, so they know what it takes to win those games," Robinson said.

"We're hoping to bring through some more of our youth, but not too much.

"In starting the senior football, they can also inspire some of the older blokes who haven't tasted success for a number of years.

On top of the returning faces, a couple of fresh faces have Bombers fans keenly awaiting the opening round.

A key part of Irymple's recent success, dynamic midfielder John Cooper brings his freakish ability to find space to the Bombers.

Marius Clarke joins the club from Darwin's St Mary's and has great lineage, being the brother of former AFL footballer's Raphael and Xavier Clarke.

His addition will be supported by ex-Chirside Park youngster Connor Wilson; the 20-year-old midfielder set to add another pacey option to an already blistering midfield.

The Bombers will need a key forward to step up this year and help them hit the scoreboard more consistently, if the side are to turn their close defeats into wins.

Young gun Laing Waddingham made his senior debut last season, and has shown the ability to kick goals; he could make up part of

that added scoring threat.

While it may sound easier said than done, the goal is simple for Wandella's coaches this year: make the finals, then it's anybody's game.

"The last couple of seasons have shown that anyone can win," Robinson said.

"With only six sides, you just have to get into the finals, and anything could happen."

FROM THE COACH

"We've really got that determination to get back into the finals, then you've really got a chance to go the whole way.

"We're hoping to bring through some more of our youth, but not too much.

"What might have seemed like a bit of a slow recruiting season has quickly turned into a pretty strong group of new players.

"We're hoping that our senior group will be that nice mix of some younger blokes surrounded by some experienced heads."

KEY PLAYER

Russell Rich: Last year's EG Hunt medallist has become the focal point of Wandella's engine room since joining in 2018.

A contested beast, he loves to get his head over the football and feed it to the outside.

The determination and experience to stamp his authority on a game; When Rich is on, so are Wandella.

Clearly made the right decision to return from retirement before the 2023 season.

NETBALL

AFTER just three A Grade wins last season, Wandella have appointed two new coaches in Trishelle Robinson and returning player Jasmine Morris.

"We are both keen for a prosperous year ahead," Robinson said.

"We have not lost many players and hope to work with this group of girls to improve upon last season."

The Bombers' pre-season has had a focus on fitness and fun, and included a pre-season boot camp.

INS & OUTS

INS: Eliza Perryman (Boort).
OUTS: None supplied.

PLAYER TO WATCH

Eliza Perryman: From Boort, Perryman will be an attacking midcourt player who can move into goals. She has played representative netball for North Central and will be a handy inclusion.

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North Central Football & Netball



Sea Lake Nandaly capped off a perfect season in 2023, by winning the North Central grand final by 14 points over Nullawil. Picture: Brook Shaune-Bould



Nullawil "A" grade premiership team: Back row, left to right, Meg Fawcett, Jackie Watts, Ella Sheahan, Madeline Smith (best on court). Middle: Sophie Mathiske, Lauren Thompson (coach), Gemma Fawcett (capt.), Meg Hogan (coach). Front: Jasmine Morris, Zoe Ferrier, Jessie Fawcett, Rachael Smith. Picture: The Buloke Times

Tigers still the team to beat

NORTH Central Football League offers a lot of excitement in 2024, with nine teams optimistic they have a shot at finals football.

The 2023 season ladder was not always a true reflection of results, except in the case of Sea Lake Nandaly.

The Tigers went the entire season undefeated and followed that up with a grand final win against Nullawil, who made their finals dash from fourth on the ladder.

But teams such as Wedderburn and Charlton are underrated when judging last year's ladder as several of their games against the top four sides were tight finishes where a kick split the difference.

Boort is another side with much promise after a diabolical injury riddled year where

they limped through the season struggling to fill a full side.

But with recovery, strong recruitment and the development of a handy set of juniors through the club ranks, the side promises to stand up to its true potential.

Of the nine sides, six have engaged new senior coaches who come into the league with fresh eyes, new strategies, and a wealth of experience behind them.

Structure and process is at the heart of all teams' ambitions this year and most coaches felt an ability to maintain those things would return dividends on the scorecard.

And while it was Sea Lake Nandaly who took the chocolates last year, with a 12-point premiership win over league debutants

Nullawil, the Maroons also welcome a new coach and some crafty recruitment, including that of Matthew Wade, who comes with a wealth of football knowledge and experience.

The Tigers, on the other hand, have made very little change to their line-up and coaching staff.

The old saying "if it's not broken, don't fix it," runs true with an undefeated season and premiership trophy on the mantel.

The Tigers did the least amount of recruitment, and head into the 2024 season with confidence that they will be the team to beat again.

In a hard-fought grand final, Sea Lake Nandaly were able to withstand Nullawil's surges, but the Maroons sent a stern warning to the competition that they were there for

sheep stations.

Birchip-Watchem created intensity all season with a consistent game style that saw them head into the preliminary final confidently from second place on the ladder.

But they were caught off guard by Nullawil who proceeded to the big dance while the Bulls were left to lick their wounds.

They come into this season extremely hungry to make amends and have made several changes to the side, including a full recruitment campaign.

With strong recruitment from Boort, Donald and Charlton, and so many changes in leadership, the season is shaping up to be a surprise packet.

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FOOTY FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1997. **GROUND:** George Cartwright Oval, Birchip. **PREMIERSHIPS:** 2 (2001, 2002).
PRESIDENT: Brad Sharp. **SENIOR COACH:** Trevor Ryan. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** 2nd.
2023 BEST & FAIREST: Nick Rippon. **2023 LEADING GOALKICKER:** Ben Edwards (87 goals).



Birchip-Watchem's Ben Hogan. Picture: Blake Lee

BIRCHIP-Watchem were disappointed to finish third on the 2023 premiership ladder and go down in the preliminary final after playing a consistent season.

Coach Trevor Ryan said the finals loss took a bit of time to get over, given they had played well all year and were beaten by Nullawil by 12 points.

Nathan Gordon played a key role in last year's side but won't be returning to the Bulls' line-up. Clever recruiting should stop up any gaps.

Ben Edwards and Dale Hinkley return to the side alongside recruit Hamish Hosking, who will take a lead ruck role.

The recruitment of midfielder Merrick Buchanan will add more inside strength as will the return of Stefan Pye.

Ryan said the key to success this season would be a return to consistent footy, and he was confident they had the depth to ensure that.

FROM THE COACH

"We are expecting to be competitive week-in and week-out and have set ourselves up for another crack at playing finals.

"A focus of the club has been around developing as much of the young junior talent we have at the club.

"We feel consistency in the way we move the ball will be key for us again this year and is going to give us our best chance at playing finals footy and taking that next step to a premiership.

"I've been very happy with our pre-season training program which started mid-January.

"With a few new players into the ranks, we will be looking to connect as a team early on and I'm confident we can produce the consistent performances as we did last year."

KEY PLAYER

Hamish Hosking: The Bulls' new lead ruckman is set to be a stand-up for Birchip-Watchem in the middle, along with Nick Rippon and his brother, Marshall Rippon. Both are skilful running midfielders who can break the centre open and if Hosking can create those opportunities from the ruck, Birchip-Watchem will be impressive out of the centre.

NS & OUTS

INS: Darcy Reid, Matthew Lade, Harrison Hawkins, Nick Ryan, Meyrick Buchanan, Stefan Pye, Angus Butterfield, Daniel Bell, Hamish Hosking.

OUTS: William Marks, Nathan Gordon, Pathrick Sheehan, Jonty Randell, Lachlan Randell, Daniel Batalotto, Tom Batalotto, Ben Christadooloo, Daniel Castilano, Josh Booth.

NETBALL

BIRCHIP-Watchem were within reach of the top contenders last year, taking out fourth place on the ladder and earning a finals spot.

But a defeat to Nullawil by just two goals pushed them out of the premiership race in

the first semi-final.

Frustratingly for the Bulls, they had defeated Nullawil in round 10 by one goal and runners-up Boort in round 16 by two goals, proving they were competitive with the top contenders.

They will return to the court this season with new coach Stacey Hamilton at the helm and eager to make amends.

They appear to be a side ready to claim a premiership that slipped out of their hands last season.

PLAYER TO WATCH

Not supplied.

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Boort



FOOTY FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1951. **GROUND:** Boort Park. **PREMIERSHIPS:** 3 (1954, 1982, 2008).
PRESIDENT: Kane Arnold. **SENIOR COACH:** Dale Cameron. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** 7th.
2023 BEST & FAIREST: Jarrod Fitzpatrick. **2023 LEADING GOALKICKER:** Jarrod Fitzpatrick (24 goals).

Boort's Keanu Padula.
Picture: Blake Lee



BOORT'S 2023 season started optimistically but a barrage of injuries saw the side slip out of finals contention fairly early on in the season.

With 12 of their players out, Boort continued to play reasonable football with several of their losses being just a kick the difference.

Considering none of those matches were played with a full team, the Magpies will be looking to swoop into a top four position after some clever recruiting.

Boort welcomes 15 new players into the fold and bids farewell to seven of its outgoing players.

Coach Dale Cameron said the outgoing players did not contribute to the season last year due to injury and he was looking forward to the juniors who will be promoted through the junior ranks.

"We have eight from our under-17s side coming through to seniors this year and all played in the winning under-17 premiership side last year," he said.

"We will be a mixed side this year, a lot of new talent mixed with older heads and there is no pressure on us, we will take time to build.

"We've recruited some great players to the side with a lot of experience so we're really looking forward to what the season brings."

James Campbell is one of those recruits and is making the move back to Boort from Sebastopol with a wealth of experience and VFL grand finals under his belt.

Jhye Baddeley-Kelly is another exciting newcomer with three years of VFL playing experience and Matt Austin moves into the team with an extensive history, including being listed with Brisbane Lions.

Despite extensive changes to the line-up, Cameron said team cohesion at training had been good and he was looking forward to a better injury-free team this year.

FROM THE COACH

"I'm expecting an exciting year for Boort as we build a team for the future.

"Injury was a major problem last year, but we still played some good football.

"We struggled down forward but held our own held across the rest of the field, we just couldn't get points on the board
 "We're expecting Will Perryman to help fill that gap.

"We also have three guys who have relocated to Victoria from Alice Springs and have chosen Boort due to family connections here.

"Jacob Rowlands is another player we have high hopes for."

KEY PLAYER

Will Perryman: Perryman enters the Magpies' line up with Pyramid Hill's leading goalkicker title in 2023 and a vision to provide a solid target down forward.

An accurate kick with strong hands in the marking contest, Perryman comes to the club in strong form and superior fitness.

INS & OUTS

INS: Jayden Dick, Jacob Rowlands, Nicholas Clydesdale, Wade Broadstock, Malachi Coleman, Matt Austin, Jhye Baddeley-Kelly, Will Perryman, Mitchell O'Donoghue, James Byrne, Luke Dowdel.

OUTS: Nil.

NETBALL

GEORGIE Haw takes the reins in her sixth year of coaching with Boort, after having last season away from the side.

The team played well all year to make the grand final but went down to Nullawil by five points in a disappointing finish.

This year the side will be without tall

shooter Stephanie Haw and wing attack Jo Isaac.

Haw said the side would fill the gaps with players from B Grade.

"We're really fortunate to have a lot of depth through our B Grade side so we feel we'll be competitive again this year," she said.

PLAYER TO WATCH

Emma Darker: Darker will take a full-time place in the A Grade side this year after bouncing between both A Grade and B

Grade last year.

She will provide valuable support in defence.

A smart player, Darker consistently makes good decisions under pressure.

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Charlton

FOOTY
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FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1940. GROUND: Charlton Park. PREMIERSHIPS: 13 (1940, 1946, 1947, 1950, 1966, 1973, 1974, 1989, 1990, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2016). PRESIDENT: Kris Dixon. SENIOR COACH: Mitch Collins. 2023 LADDER POSITION: 8th. 2023 BEST & FAIREST: Jesse Taylor. 2023 LEADING GOALKICKER: Nick Thompson (41 goals).



Charlton's Jed Carey.
Picture: Blake Lee

CHARLTON hope to hit the ground running this season with a host of returning players making their way back to the club and new playing-coach Mitch Collins at the wheel.

Despite an eighth-place finish on last year's ladder, Collins said he believed the team would improve with the addition of returning players and a handful of recruits.

"The second half of the year was optimistic for us, where we were able to push teams like Birchip and Nullawil," he said.

"We had a slow start that was impacted by Melbourne recruits joining the team and it always takes a while for things to adjust and settle, which they did.

"Those boys are back again this year and we should see further improvement."

Bailey Kemp returns to the side as a big centre half-forward who will prove handy for creating a options and will also spend time in the ruck.

Tom Finlay returns from a knee injury and will create opportunities with his versatility and ability to play anywhere on the ground.

His experience will guide the younger members of the side and allow him to take more of a leadership role.

In defence, Joe Tormy is a key backman with size on his side, which will bolster Charlton against some of the opposition's big forwards.

The returning players coupled with the younger guys who played their first senior year of football in 2023 have had a chance to mould and we should see a more experienced and confident Charlton this season.

FROM THE COACH

"I think competitive-wise we hope to be present at every single game we play.

"The top sides are very strong units and we will aim to stay in the game as much as we can and try to win a few along the way.

"We're always striving for finals football, that's what we are all here for but we're realistic, we know where we are at.

"We'll be giving it our best shot every week and hopefully learning and developing along the way."

KEY PLAYER

Harry Taylor: Taylor is an inside midfielder who can go forward and back with an elite set of skills. He gives his all every week and his passion for the game has encouraged a strong pre-season campaign that sees him in top shape and ready for the 2024 season.

INS & OUTS

INS: James Keeble, Tyler Bates, Oscar Wyrzykowski, Jack Browne, Mitchell Collins.

OUTS: Cobi Fitzpatrick.

NETBALL

THE Guardian and Gannawarra Times were unable to contact a representative of the Charlton netball side but would like to pay tribute to a dedicated netballer who passed away in March.

Maddison (Maddi) Fitzpatrick played her first game at Charlton in 2014.

Throughout her playing career, she experienced success as a league representative from 2016 in the under 13 side.

In 2017 she was selected for the AFLCV

Academy and in 2018 she was selected again as well as taking a place in the Bendigo Academy of Sport.

From here, success continued as a player and coach for Charlton's A Grade side along with a variety of awards, nominations

and team selections at league and higher levels.

The club paid tribute to her dedication and talent and said she will be missed around the netball courts.



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Donald



FOOTY FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1932. **GROUND:** Donald Recreation Reserve. **PREMIERSHIPS:** 13 (1936, 1937, 1939, 1949, 1963, 1979, 1980, 1987, 1992, 1993, 2002, 2004, 2006). **PRESIDENT:** Danny Forrest.
SENIOR COACH: Josh Potter. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** 3rd. **2023 BEST & FAIREST:** Ross Young.
2023 LEADING GOALKICKER: Sam Dunstan (93 goals).



Donald's Hayden Geddes. Picture: Blake Lee

DONALD'S season came to a crashing end last year, with the side struck down by a horrific string of injuries.

Although they finished fourth on the season ladder, they lost to Nullawil in the finals while having to field 11 players under 20 years of age.

The good news for this season is that 95 per cent of the team from last year will return injury-free for round 1.

The Royal Blues have also recruited height and strength to bolster their stocks.

Club president Danny Forrest said the goal was to recruit aggressively to support the existing team.

"We welcomed Andrew Browne into ruck duties, and he is a big guy at 204cm," he said.

"We are also very excited about Dale Kerr because he's just an all-around elite sportsman and he will bring a high standard to the midfield.

"We're also focused on our young kids coming through.

"They will be a year older and stronger and we're going to keep developing the young locals and make sure they enjoy their footy.

"Josh Potter is a first-year coach who brings a wealth of passion and enthusiasm to the club, and he'll be supported by our experienced senior players."

The side showed lots of promise in its two practice matches and training numbers had been good, which Forrest attributed to Potter's ability to pull the side together and motivate them.

Forrest also paid respect to the volunteers who keep the club running and in particular, Peter Falkner, who is entering his 21st consecutive year as club secretary.

"He's a tremendous loyal servant and a strong role model within in our club," he said.

"Peter has never kicked a football, so his dedication is driven by his love for the club community and it's that sort of commitment that will keep our club healthy, well into the future."

FROM THE COACH

"We will pretty much have a full list to choose from as all our injured players from last year will be back and available for round 1.

"The only one missing is Todd Stevenson, who has a one-week suspension to serve.

"It will be business as usual; we won't change too much but work with the extra depth in the midfield.

"We will be bleeding the young boys while we have such great leadership in the side, our older boys will mentor them and that should keep us in good stead for years to come.

"Jesse Wallan has stepped up to assistant coach and has had lot of experience in top leagues in Melbourne and Ryan Hards, who was our captain last year, did an Achilles early in the season and he's back, very fit and ready for round 1.

"So overall, we are feeling very positive and looking forward to a competitive year."

KEY PLAYER

Ryley Barrack: A standout defender who tied in the league best-and-fairest last year. He's hard at the ball and throws himself into the play and is rarely beaten.

Ranking up with the best defenders in the league, Barrack can quickly turn defence into attack. He's a defender who loves to attack and is a valuable interceptor.

INS & OUTS

INS: Jack Italia, Andrew Browne, Todd Stevenson, Patrick Morgan, Dale Kerr.

OUTS: Sam Dunstan.

NETBALL

DONALD'S A Grade side head into the new season bolstered by a string of recruits, young players coming through ranks and a few mature players returning to the club.

Coach Xanthi Rice is also returning to A Grade coaching duties and said the side promised to be competitive, with finals the

main goal.

"We have a couple of new recruits, including Jess White and Eilish Flagg, who will fill some gaps left by players who exited this year," she said.

"Jess will move into the goals and Eilish is a nice, tall defender who reads the play well.

"It should be a competitive season with Nullawil and Birchip making good progress last year and we'll be hoping to land ourselves another shot at finals this year."

PLAYER TO WATCH

Scarlett Funche: Funche is a young player who made her A Grade debut last year. She is a very athletic player who can switch from goals to centre and with a second year of senior level netball under her belt, will be key to the side's success.

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Nullawil

FOOTY FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 2023. **GROUND:** Nullawil Recreation Reserve. **PREMIERSHIPS:** None (7 premierships in Golden Rivers FNL). **PRESIDENT:** Grant Kelly. **SENIOR COACH:** Darryl Wilson. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** 4th (Runners-up). **2023 BEST & FAIREST:** Patrick Kelly. **2023 LEADING GOALKICKER:** Adam Thomson (47 goals).



Nullawil's David Ibister.
Picture: Wendy Watts



NULLAWIL heads into the 2024 season with an air of confidence after playing in the grand final in 2023.

While the side was unsuccessful, there was much to be positive about for the team, who was making its NCFL debut after exiting the Golden Rivers league. Seasoned coach Darryl Wilson takes over the coaching helm from Brett Barker this year and comes with a wealth of experience. Most notably, a coaching role with VFL side Bendigo Bombers and AFL Central Victoria coach of the year awards. Barker will continue to don the boots for the Maroons. Rylee Smith returns to the side after spending two seasons with Kerang in the CMFNL and long-term stable mates Mitch Farmer, Jordy Humphreys, Matt Quigley, Dean Putt, David Ibister, Daniel Watts and Kyle Doran have all re-signed. Brothers Zac and Lucas Caccaviello and Dude and Sol Kelly will provide speed and strength around the ball, and the addition of Matthew Wade to the midfield will bring a wealth of skill and experience when he swaps one maroon guernsey (Swan Hill) for another. The Maroons will benefit with a successful last season under their belt in terms of connection and consistency. They promise to be a dynamic side across the field and should feature in the top four of the 2024 season.

FROM THE COACH

"I'm excited at the chance for a new challenge and a new chapter in my footy career at a club that has already been up and about. "That was very appealing and why I chose to come here. "One of our main focuses will be around developing the list we've got and there are some great quality players at Nullawil. "Part of the work we will be looking at is learning what stepping up to a new league requires, because the step up in quality of the league is substantial. "I'm very satisfied with the playing group and hopefully we can push forward to success."

KEY PLAYER

Matthew Wade: Wade stands out in terms of experience and leadership skills and a strong resume of football success. His strength in defence and the midfield will be a key addition to the side and his leadership within the playing group will be an advantage.

INS & OUTS

INS: Samuel Hogan, Peter Faulks, Hunter Lawrence, Rylee Smith, Mathew Wade, Nicholas Keogh. **OUTS:** Patrick Kelly.

NETBALL

A GRADE coach Lauren Thompson said the Nullawil side would not be resting on its laurels after taking out the 2023 grand final in its debut season in the NCFNL. "We're not sure what to expect this year but our aim is to finish in the top four again," Thompson said.

Despite finishing fourth on the home-and-away season ladder, the Maroons shot through the finals series to take out the coveted premiership, beating Boort by five goals on their home courts. "The team remains stable with key defender Maddi Quigley the only major

out and versatile Mackenzie Smith coming into the side to play either mid or defence," Thompson said. "We'll be keeping a close eye on our opponents with particular focus on Birchip-Watchem, Boort, Wedderburn and Sea Lake Nandaly as the teams to beat."

PLAYER TO WATCH

Meg Hogan: Hogan comes into the 2024 season hot off a strong pre-season preparation and will be extremely match-fit. A dynamic and fast player who can dominate in defence but also run through the centre if required.



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Sea Lake Nandaly Tigers



FOOTY FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 2016. **GROUND:** Sea Lake Recreation Reserve. **PREMIERSHIPS:** 1 (2019). **PRESIDENT:** Ivan Tait.
SENIOR COACHES: Billy McInnes and Bryce Delmenico. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** 1st (Premiers).
2023 BEST & FAIREST: Trent Donnan. **2023 LEADING GOALKICKER:** Josh Jenkins (49 goals).



Sea Lake Nandaly's Billy McInnes.
Picture: Blake Lee

SEA Lake Nandaly proved their dominance in 2023, taking out the league's premiership by defeating Nullawil.

Undefeated all year and with a sturdy team of veterans including Ryan O'Sullivan and ex-AFL star Josh Jenkins, plus a stream of established younger players, the side pulled together to hold off a gallant fight by Nullawil to win by 14 points.

The team heads back into action with an almost identical line-up, only losing Matt Farelly, but gaining Adam Pattison and Lachie McClelland.

President Ivan Tait said the club was pleased with its player-retention rate and attributed it to a family culture at the club and a focus on developing young players.

"Our club is very connected, and we are focused on developing our younger players to blood them through to the seniors," he said.

"Because it is a very family-oriented club, we find our players stay and we are now looking at the second generation of players coming through.

"Players such as Ryan O'Sullivan and Josh Jenkins are important not just because of their success and leadership, but because it shows that the club is a great place to be.

"These guys would be an asset to any club, but they choose to stay with us."

Tait said the benefit of focusing on local juniors meant that the team was local and very connected.

"By bringing our young guys through the ranks, we have a good turnout on training nights because they are not having to travel far to be here," he said.

"This leads to a well-connected side on game day, and I believe it's been a big part of our success."

Tait said the club aspired to back up last year's premiership win and noted

Birchip-Watchem and Nullawil as formidable opponents.

"They've recruited well, so it seems like it will be a very competitive season," he said.

FROM THE COACH

"We'll be ready and looking forward to the challenge of everyone chasing us.

"It will be a chance to build on some of our deficits that other teams will be looking to exploit. We will continue to make changes to improve but we will also keep much the same and build on last year's success.

"Lachy McClelland returns to the club and will be a handy inclusion as a roving half-forward with great legs and height and Adam Pattison will be useful down back and in the ruck.

"We expect an even competition with improvement from Wycheproof Narraport and Donald. Birchip-Watchem and Nullawil are also going to be hard to beat."

PLAYER TO WATCH

Thomas Cox: Cox is an up-and-coming player who has worked very hard on the training track.

He will run through the midfield and brings plenty of speed, endurance and toughness, as well as cleanness with the ball.

INS & OUTS

INS: Adam Pattison, Lachlan McClelland.

OUTS: Matt Farelly.

NETBALL

THE Tigers' A Grade side will return with a few new faces and a few returning ones this season.

Coach Jody Cox said while it may take some time to settle in, the side would be competitive this season.

"Ash Roberts, Ebony McClean and Nakia

Nunn are coming back into the team and will bring experience and leadership to our younger players," she said.

"Grace Chattel and Emily Johnson are new to the team, but everyone will have a part to play if we are to have success."

PLAYER TO WATCH

Ash Roberts: Roberts is an experienced A Grade player who can make a difference in defence or the centre. Although fairly small,

she has a great jump and plays very clean in the ring to minimise penalties. She is agile and her skill and knowledge will be a great asset to the whole team.

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FAST
FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1930. **GROUND:** Lord Nelson Park. **PREMIERSHIPS:** 11 (1930, 1932, 1933, 1934, 1948, 1958, 1978, 1988, 1998, 1999, 2015). **PRESIDENT:** Dean Wandels. **SENIOR COACH:** Scott Driscoll. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** 9th. **2023 BEST & FAIREST:** Brad Organ. **2023 LEADING GOALKICKER:** Jake Hicks (16 goals).



St Arnaud's Ricky Henricksen.
Picture: Blake Lee

ST ARNAUD head into the season with a new coach, assistant coach and a positive mindset.

Scott Driscoll takes the helm after a stint with Jeparit-Rainbow, who merged with Southern Mallee Giants to a new league last year.

Driscoll is coming in with a fresh set of eyes and a clean slate for the winless wooden spooners of 2023.

The positive of being in that position means the side can focus on development of the local playing group with a bit of freedom.

Driscoll, who will be a playing coach, said a large part of his coaching method would be directed at developing a side that puts the whole team first.

“We’re focusing on what each team member can do for the team during that 120 minute of gameplay,” he said.

“We had a good practice match where the guys had a good game and a positive mindset, but we know it is going to take work for us to be competitive.

“We will be constructive in our reviews but not focus on the negative as we try to build confidence in our process.”

Tom Petrelli returns to the side after a year off due to injury, and Zac Phillips and Bailey Nicholas have made the move from Adelaide.

“They’re a couple of young guys who have a real class and energy about them,” Driscoll said.

Toren Petre takes the role of assistant coach beside Driscoll.

FROM THE COACH

“Being a young group and in terms of what we hope to achieve this year, it’s about positive strides and learning from those first-round games and being able to review and build upon our performance.

“We will be assessing and making changes on the spot. If things aren’t working, we will be making adaptations, not flogging a dead horse continually. “It’s a year of growth, education and development for our side.”

KEY PLAYERS

Harley Durward: Durward steps into a vice-captain role this year and comes off a solid pre-season campaign. He displays great versatility and is a strong defender. He’s been with the club previously, so brings knowledge and leadership skills and a desire to play for his teammates.

INS & OUTS

INS: Ryan Lempa, Jordan Nicholas, Zac Phillips, Bailey Nicholas, Scott Driscoll, Toren Petre. **OUTS:** Nil.

NETBALL

ST Arnaud didn’t have much success reflected on the season ladder last year but coach Dylan Perri said there was much to be positive about.

“It has been a period of building for us and that will continue this year also,” he said. “We feel we have made a lot of improvements, including our fitness and we will be shooting for the stars and hoping for

a top-four ladder finish.” The side lost speedy midcourter Sidney Dyer but has been able to account for the loss with several players returning to the side. Chelsea Grabener is a midcourter who will look to fill the gap left by Dyer. She is very fit and comes with experience. Perri said the side was looking strong in defence and the inclusion of Aleisha Petri in

defensive goals was a big gain. “I think collectively we have a group of individuals who can do their part to bring success to the team,” Perri said.

PLAYER TO WATCH

Aleisha Petri: Petri is a dynamic defender with extreme fitness on her side and experience behind her. She’s a ball winner and reads the play well. She can turn play around very quickly from defence to attack and the rest of the team will be aiming to provide support to capitalise on that.



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Wedderburn



FOOTY FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1950. **GROUND:** Donaldson Park. **PREMIERSHIPS:** 8 (1951, 1968, 1970, 2007, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014). **PRESIDENT:** Chris Hargreaves. **SENIOR COACH:** Tom Metherell.
2023 LADDER POSITION: 6th. **2023 BEST & FAIREST:** Jordan Rosengreen.
2023 LEADING GOALKICKER: Sam Barnes (57 goals).



Wedderburn's Corey Lowry.
Picture: Blake Lee

KEY PLAYER

Jackson McKewan: McKewan came to the club halfway through last season and he's a key midfielder who really drives standards. He's great as an inside midfielder and can bring other guys into the game with good decisions and a clever footy brain. He reads play well and is very silky in his use of the footy.

TOM Metherell picks up coaching duties with the Redbacks this year after former coach Sam Barnes retired.

Metherell will take a playing-coach role and hopes to improve structure within the senior side.

Wedderburn finished sixth on the 2023 ladder, but Metherell pointed out that there was not much between fourth and sixth place and he's optimistic the side can take the next step this year.

"The second-last game of the season we played Nullawil on their home ground and beat them and they went on to play in the grand final, so we certainly feel finals footy is within reach," he said.

"The boys have adapted well to the structures we have put in place, and we are focused on where we want to be as a team this year.

"We've been training since October, and we've had good results in practice matches."

Heading into the side are brothers Anthony, Michael and Richard Zelencich.

Anthony was a big goalkicker for Carisbrook last year and will aim to fill the gap left by Sam Barnes' exit.

He will provide options as a small and crafty forward who reads the game well.

Michael will settle into the job at half-back and wing and consistently gets the job done, while Rich is a key defender.

Oscar Holt comes back into the side from injury and has shown great signs so far.

He will play an important role as a medium forward with a great leap.

Noah Young is a 19-year-old from Kangaroo Flat who plays beyond his years.

Metherell described him as having a great football brain.

"He's versatile, can play anywhere, we'll have him playing through the mid," he said.

FROM THE COACH

"We are very focused on bringing structure to the side and with that, some professionalism.

"I've come in as an outsider so I'm looking at things with a fresh set of eyes and not having a history with the club, it's made the boys push harder.

"We have a group that have been playing together for four years that had success playing juniors together and we are looking for them to take the next step to playing good seniors footy.

"Like everyone, we aim to play finals football but we are also looking for internal improvement to get the best out of our year.

"We've been very fitness and structure based during pre-season and working on our defence and attacking game.

"But we're not focusing too far ahead, we'll be looking at the game in front of us each week."

INS & OUTS

INS: Jye Dingfelder, Tomas Dingfelder, Tom Metherell, Anthony Zelencich, Michael Zelencich, Richard Zelencich, Noah Furlong.

OUTS: Sam Barnes, Jordan Rosengreen.

NETBALL

WEDDERBURN will be eager to take a step further this year after a disappointing finals series in 2023.

The Redbacks finished third on the season ladder but lost both of their finals matches, going down to Nullawil by just one goal, and allowing Nullawil a path to grand final victory.

Throughout the season, Wedderburn were only defeated by the two sides above them, Boort and Nullawil, proving they're a serious contender.

Emma Lockhart returns to the coaching role, providing stability to the largely unchanged side that includes her three sisters, Grace, Aliza and Olivia.

With few changes to their line-up, only time will tell if it is enough to push them to the next level they will be actively seeking.

PLAYER TO WATCH

Meg Lowry: Lowry returns after taking a year break from the club but promises to take an even stronger leadership role within the team. She will act as assistant coach and, with years of playing experience with the Redbacks, will provide stability and a calm head in the heat of those close finishes.

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Wycheproof-Narraport



FOOTY FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1964. **GROUND:** Wycheproof Recreation Reserve. **PREMIERSHIPS:** 19 (1964, 1965, 1967, 1972, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1981, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1991, 1995, 1996, 1997, 2000, 2010, 2017, 2018). **PRESIDENT:** Ricky Allen. **SENIOR COACH:** Wayne Mitrovic. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** 5th. **2023 BEST & FAIREST:** Geddd Hommelhoff. **2023 LEADING GOALKICKER:** Geddd Hommelhoff (30 goals).

THE Demons will be playing for keeps this year, as it will be their final season under the Wycheproof-Narraport banner.

Club spokesman Rory White said the side would be aiming to go out with a bang.

The team has a long and proud history since merging in 1964 and with this season being the 60th anniversary of the merger, the club was revved up for a huge season.

The decision to merge with Nullawil ahead of the 2025 season will see them even more determined to go out on top.

Finishing fifth on the ladder last year, the Demons were within reach of finals but cracks in their depth meant they were often run down in the final quarter.

Clever recruitment this year will see those gaps filled, with some experienced players set to don the red and blue.

A new coach in Wayne Mitrovic was the first big move and White said his experience and connection to the club was a strategic decision.

"Wayne's a past player so he is known to the club and played in the 2010 premiership," he said.

"He's been around football for a lot of years and brings very good structure and process to the side."

Also joining the team are Josh Grabowski, who will provide some leadership in the midfield, and Nick Grabowski, who will provide some firepower up forward.

"Josh is a goalkicking midfielder who comes from Geelong Amateur FC with an impressive resume, including premiership wins and three years on the Bulldogs VFL list," White said.

"In addition, Morgan Fawcett returns to his old club and Maysen Murgov is expected to have an impact at either end of the ground.

"Both boys should bring structure to the back half."

In making the decision to merge with Nullawil at the end of this season, White said



Wycheproof-Narraport's
Geddd Hommelhoff. Picture: Blake Lee

it was a proactive decision that the club felt good about.

"It's getting harder to get juniors every year and we wanted to get ahead of the curve," he said.

"We've always had a good relationship with Nullawil so it was an easy, natural fit."

The club has a wealth of grand final success, having won a premiership, on average, almost every three years out of the 60 years they've played.

On average, they played in every second grand final.

With 19 titles under their belts, the

Demons will be firing on all cylinders to ensure they bow out with their 20th in hand.

INS & OUTS

INS: Morgan Fawcett, Nicholas Grabowski, Jack Marlais, Steven Kennedy, Joshua Grabowski, Maysen Murgov.

OUTS: Damien Hawbury, Justin Bateson, Jack McHutchinson.

FROM THE COACH

"A big difference for us this year will be our depth.

"We were in for three quarters last year but got found out in the final term due to a lack of depth and that has been a focus of our recruitment this year.

"The boys have had a really good pre-season and fitness is there and the team is already gelling well.

"We've added a lot of depth to our midfield with Jack Marlais and Steven Kennedy partnering with Geddd Hommelhoff.

"We've also got George Turner back from injury and he will add some toughness in the centre as a hard tackler.

"We know we are against good competition, with Sea Lake stacked with talent and Nullawil looking good with a new coach.

"But we feel we have what it takes to be there at finals time and will be hoping to pinch a top-four spot on the ladder."

KEY PLAYER

Steven Kennedy: Kennedy is a 34-year-old with loads of talent and wisdom to bring to the side.

Coming from the Ballarat league, he is a multiple league medallist and premiership winner. He took a year off last year but missed his footy so pulled the boots back on to join the Demons in their final season. Leadership and experience are key qualities, and he is match-fit with legs that will carry him well beyond four quarters. He is also very productive with the football, creating opportunities at every turn.

NETBALL

WYCHEPROOF-Narraport will head into their final season as a club after making the decision to merge with Nullawil in the 2025 season.

The team finished fifth on last year's ladder,

a clear example of the mixed-result season they had.

The Demons took comfortable wins against the sides below them on the ladder but were unable to crack the top four sides to earn

themselves a finals appearance.

This year, the side will front up with new coach Chantel White and determination to make their last season, also the club's 60th, a success.

PLAYER TO WATCH

Not supplied.

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Loddon Valley Football & Netball



Marong celebrate consecutive premierships, after their 16-point win in last yer's Loddon Valley grand final. Picture: Elizabeth Sinclair



Maiden Gully YCW were A Grade premiers last season. Picture: Maiden Gully YCW Facebook page

Mean Machine set for top gear

THE Loddon Valley football competition faces a major changing of the guard as an upgraded Bridgewater looks to turn its fifth-place finish and semi-final loss from last year into something very special this year.

Marong and Pyramid Hill might rule the roost in the seniors but after its recruitment drive, the Mean Machine is looking to be exactly that.

Not only has it signed Strathfieldsaye Storm superstar forward Lachlan Sharp – who

kicked 98 goals, including a season-high 14 against Kangaroo Flat, last year – it has also picked up Sandhurst onballer Lee Coghlan to return where his footy career began.

Both are premiership winners in the Bendigo league and Michelsen Medallists.

Perhaps the headline act is dual premiership-winning coach at Bridgewater, Andy Collins, returning to the club. He won flags there in 2014 and 2015, and again as a player in 2016. His 2023 grand final game for Sandhurst was widely believed to have been

the final game of a brilliant career but now it seems the 2015 Harding Medallist as Loddon Valley fairest-and-best is keen to play on with the Mean Machine.

The inclusion of the talented trio is a huge plus as the Rick Ladson-coached Bridgewater strives to end Marong's run toward a premiership hat-trick.

Not only will Sharp be a focal point in the forward 50m arc, but he is also helping run the team as a co-coach.

A four-time premiership player with Storm,

Sharp also earned the Ron Best Medal as league leading goalkicker three times and has won the club's goalkicking title eight times.

Pyramid Hill went close to breaking its long-running premiership drought last September and is likely to be a strong contender once again.

Talented forward Braidy Dickens returns to Pyramid Hill after a stint with Huntly.

Mick Dundon and Brad Ladson also return to the Bulldogs squad as the new season looks set to be a sizzler.



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Bears Lagoon-Serpentine



FOOTY
FAST
FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1945. **GROUND:** Janiember Park, Serpentine. **PREMIERSHIPS:** 12 (1947, 1948, 1949, 1960, 1961, 1965, 1966, 1982, 1983, 1992, 1994, 1995). **SENIOR COACH:** Jake Wilkinson.
2023 LADDER POSITION: 3rd (Preliminary finalist). **2023 BEST & FAIREST:** Justin Laird.
2023 LEADING GOALKICKER: Justin Laird (37 goals).

BEARS Lagoon-Serpentine might have the longest name in the Loddon Valley FNL but the club came up short in the 2023 season – just one game from the grand final.

So determined are the Bears to take that extra step this year, they have decided to bring in the biggest guns they could lay their hands on.

From enticing Sandhurst veteran Jake Wilkinson to sign as coach, to securing proven country football talent – and fringe Fremantle AFL player – Josh Mellington to pack some punch into its forward line. He kicked 205 goals in two seasons at Violet Town, before playing nine games at Benalla last season.

Add in the return of ruckman Nathan Twigg to the club and arrival of Darcy Hawker from Boort and you begin to get the picture of where this coach is going in the new season.

Wilkinson said the off-season had been “about bringing in some top-end quality”.

“Being a defender by trade means you want to keep opposition teams to low scores, but also use that defence as a rebound so we can move the footy well – and quickly – from defence to offence,” he said.

“Because we have built an attack based around Josh Mellington, Farran Priest, James Ripplingale and Andrew Gladman, you want to make sure you give them every chance to operate alone, or one-on-one, so turning defence into offence quickly has to be pivotal for its effectiveness.”

He said the list was probably where they fell short last season.

“They were a good team, but others had their measure, so it was important to recruit players who would make an impact straight away,” Wilkinson said.

“We have had a great start – with as many



as 30-plus on the track every training, which has helped make life much easier.

“The group is pretty supportive, which has been nice, and shown they are always willing to give new things a go and learn a couple of things.”

Wilkinson reports he wants the team to work with his game plan that he has drilled into them – “after that, the ladder should take

care of itself”.

“We haven't done a heap of line work just yet as we've focused more on whole team structure, but the plan has been to get into that during our practice matches leading up to round 1.”

He considered last year's grand finalists – Marong and Pyramid Hill – the ones to chase again.

FROM THE COACH

“My focus on fitness has been a big one, while making sure everyone is on the same page regarding how we want to structure things. We always try and make sure we do things with a purpose and are not just training for the sake of training. If we're doing a drill, we're doing it to make us a better team.”

KEY PLAYER

Josh Mellington: He might have only played a handful of games for Fremantle but he has been a great forward in Victorian country football for a number of years. He's a very experienced operator, having played at the highest level and been a class performer in the Ovens & Murray and Goulburn Valley leagues. He was expected to add some polish to the forward line, be a direct target and a leader on the field.

INS & OUTS

INS: Josh Mellington (Benalla), Darcy Haker (Boort), Farran Priest (Echuca United), Tyler Myles (Maiden Gully-YCW), Ross Turner (Mitiamo), Doolan Nihill (White Hills).

OUTS: Aidan Brohm (North Bendigo), Kyal Zass (travelling Australia), Anthony Lewin (Swan Hill).

NETBALL

THERE'S one goal uniting the Bears in 2024 – getting both their top teams out of the cellar and into the finals action.

The footballers propped up the LV seniors ladder and have turned to a new coaching panel to turn that around.

And so have the netballers, who after a winless 2023 season, have pulled off a major coup, signing Danielle O'Toole, last year's A Grade best and fairest at

powerhouse Marong, to help them net a few victories.

It was perhaps the league's biggest off-season deal – and it will be a true test for O'Toole to drag the Bears back into the competition.

Key players for the BLS line-up include Elyssa Hartland, a dual best-and-fairest winner at the club.

A big pre-season for the Bears has

included sessions at Gurri Wanyarra in Kangaroo Flat, F45 Bendigo and Body Fit.

The club's coaching panel is Danielle O'Toole, A Grade; Lara Clements, B Grade; Nicky James, C Grade; Kylie Addlem, C Reserve; Sarah Perry, 17-and-under; Kiera Ellis, 15-and-under; Ash Long and Jess Penny, 13-and-under; and Ava Francis, Minis. Another key appointment was Amber Gibson as junior development coach.

The Bears are on their home court on April 13 to face Pyramid Hill in round 1.

PLAYER TO WATCH

Not supplied.

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Bridgewater



FOOTY FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1931. **GROUND:** Bridgewater Recreation Reserve. **PREMIERSHIPS:** 22 (1938, 1939, 1945, 1950, 1955, 1959, 1962, 1963, 1974, 1976, 1980, 1984, 1985, 1988, 1991, 2010-2016).
PRESIDENT: Justin Symons. **SENIOR COACHES:** Rick Ladson and Lachlan Sharp. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** 5th.
2023 BEST & FAIREST: Darcy Wood. **2023 LEADING GOALKICKER:** Joshua Martyn (46 goals).

FIFTH is the hot spot on the Loddon Valley football league ladder this year – everyone who finished south of it in 2023 has made that the benchmark of success.

It's where Bridgewater did finish, and although it has had a very serious crack at bolstering its ranks in the off-season, it is still facing something of an uphill challenge.

The top four sides have been going flat out stacking their ranks with some genuine talent, some as replacements but most are new blood, and quality players who will raise the stakes for everyone when the season begins.

And that's the dilemma facing co-coach Rick Ladson.

He has had his own recruiting coups, including marquee names such as Strathfieldsaye's Lachlan Sharp and the returns from Sandhurst of Lee Coghlan and Andy Collins.

Big news in the league, especially when you toss in three more from Strathfieldsaye: Harry Conway, Jack Neylon and Joe Mayes.

Last season, Sharp kicked 98 goals, including a season-high 14 against Kangaroo Flat in August.

No question, Ladson has done just about everything he can to get his side ready for the dream to come.

"The youth we have coming through is really promising and we're really excited about what lies ahead," he said.

"It's always exciting when you have an off-season line we did.

"Bringing in the experience we have to the footy club has been fantastic. The training sessions have been intense and there's a buzz around the club.

"The boys are really keen to do well and



Bridgewater's Jack Symons looks to move the footy.
Picture: Elizabeth Sinclair

push each other. The commitment of the group has been really pleasing.

"While we've recruited well, at the end of the day we're still 20 goals behind the best side (Marong), so there's plenty of work to do."

By those calculations, it also puts them 18 goals behind Pyramid Hill, last season's runner-up, which has also been doing some

recruiting of its own in its bid to catch Marong. But Ladson wasn't fazed.

"There's some good energy around the place. When you come together as a group, and you're striving for success, it's really important to have that connection and have some fun while you're working hard – and we are."

FROM THE COACH

"It's easy to get caught up in the pre-season hype but everything you do pays off in September, not March. It has been exciting bringing in the talent we have been able to sign for 2024 but we have to convert that on the field and there's no doubt the commitment is there, you can feel it everywhere you go around the club."

KEY PLAYER

Lachlan Sharp: He is set to deliver as part of the coaching staff and, on game day, his co-coach Rick Ladson says his sheer presence on the field will invaluable for the younger players as an example of how it's really done, and encourage the more senior players to raise their own bars.

INS & OUTS

INS: Lachlan Sharp (Strathfieldsaye), Lee Coghlan (Sandhurst), Andy Collins (Sandhurst), Harry Conway (Strathfieldsaye), Jack Neylon (Strathfieldsaye), Joe Mayes (Strathfieldsaye).

OUTS: None.

NETBALL

A 7-9 record meant Bridgewater finished last season in sixth place, but just a victory behind the fifth-placed Newbridge.

Among the stars in the '23 campaign were goal defence Kirsten Galea, who earned the Pam Collins Memorial Award for best and fairest, Olivia Colliccoat, goal shooter Danielle Flood and Ashlee Bowen.

Co-coaches of A and B grades for this season will be Caz Wood and Olivia Colliccoat, and they have also been able to recruit

Kangaroo Flat's Carly Van Den Heuvel to slip into the red and white and help transform the also-rans into genuine finalists.

With the gutting of Maiden Gully YCW's back-to-back premiership team, the season has been thrown wide open for any team wanting to stand up.

The club will be looking to lift at both ends of the court – the A Grade team shot just 673 goals in 2023 while conceding 799, compared to Maiden Gully's benchmark of 1128 goals for

and just 593 against.

Also on Bridgewater's coaching panel are Georgia Mamouny-Brown for C Grade and Naomi Millie for C Reserve.

Other coaches are Tamara Hayes, 17-and-under; Dannielle Flood, 15-and-under; Julia Elkingston, 13-and-under; and Bree Wickham, Minis.

The Mean Machine is at home to play Newbridge in round 1 on April 13.

A night match at Maiden Gully a week later

will be followed by clashes with Inglewood at home, Pyramid Hill away and Bears Lagoon-Serpentine at home.

PLAYER TO WATCH

Not supplied.





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Calivil United



FOOTY FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1997. **GROUND:** Calivil Recreation Reserve. **PREMIERSHIPS:** 8 (1998, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2017). **PRESIDENT:** Rod Lea. **SENIOR COACH:** Anthony Dennis. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** 8th. **2023 BEST & FAIREST:** Jake Lawry. **2023 LEADING GOALKICKER:** Ben Baker (23 goals).

ANTHONY Dennis has one experience he is desperate to share with the rest of his Calivil United team – winning a flag.

In his first stint as coach – from 2016 to 2018 – he took the Demons to the 2017 premiership and he is just as keen to get there again himself.

And if his off-season recruiting is anything to go by, he would be planning for finals as the starting point this season.

“We have added around 10 players to the list and that depth has been reflected in the quality of our pre-season, which has been excellent, with a regular 25 every night – and we hit 30 the other day,” Dennis said.

“This is my second year back and we all know what we want out of this year and everyone has been working hard to get there.

“Even I reckon I will be playing at my lightest in more than 10 years – I have had to do that to lead by example, you can’t ask the boys to do it if you won’t.”

Dennis came home – his family still farms in the district – after time away at Tongala, which was closer to where he had been living, and was planning to play out his career as a Demon.

“I am delighted we only lost a few players after 2023 because the turnover here since COVID has been ridiculous,” he said.

“But right now, in fitness and attitude, we are well ahead of where we were last year, and that’s a big positive for us.

“Also, if you analyse our 2023 season, while we only won three games, we also only lost another six to eight by four goals or less, as we didn’t bat all that deeply, but we have got a bit more grunt in the line-up for 2024.”

But Dennis conceded last year’s top four had “really loaded up” for the new season, so



Calivil United's Anthony Dennis in action last season.
Picture: Elizabeth Sinclair

grabbing that fifth and final slot was what he saw as a realistic target right now.

Once you get there, finals tend to be a different ballgame in which anything can happen – and does.

“With me and assistant coach Sam Maher both playing, we will be relying heavily on Ross Maxted to run things from the bench, and as a former player and premiership coach we couldn’t be in better hands on game day,” he said.

FROM THE COACH

“I reckon the thing which sets us apart this year from previous seasons is the attitude of the whole squad. The work ethic, the fitness and the obvious extra outside training players are doing are all great signs we are headed in the right direction. When you add our recruiting to the mix, and our minimal losses, I think supporters can look forward to seeing a different team take the field in 2024.”

KEY PLAYERS

Lewis Fisher: Here’s a tough midfield onballer from the Bendigo league who has brought a new level of intensity to the squad.

Sam Maher: Also out of Bendigo, his attitude is incredible and coach Anthony Dennis said he and Lewis had really lifted the training standard, important for setting a great direction for the side.

INS & OUTS

INS: Sam Maher (South Bendigo), Kane Shelton (Golden Square), Lewis Fisher (Golden Square), Darcy Thompson (Ballarat), Sam Green (Boort), Mitch Stephens (Echuca), Brodie Wagner (Boort).

OUTS: Mitch Avard (Huntly), Lachie Brook (Huntly), Henry Miller (retired).

NETBALL

IF it is a young person’s world, then the world is Calivil United’s oyster – as far as the A Grade netball is concerned.

Because new coach Hayley Fawcett may well be fielding the youngest team in the competition as she looks to turn one of last season’s strugglers into a force to be reckoned with.

And on court there will be a lot of expectation that experienced defender Michelle

Balic will become the team leader.

“We have had some really good numbers at pre-season, which is always a good sign but particularly from so many younger ones,” Fawcett said.

“Unfortunately we have lost one of our main goalers, Amy Murfitt, which was a bit disappointing. She is heading up north, which is a really big loss.

“But we’ve kept Akeily Pearce, a fantastic

defender. We have also picked up her friend Adele Barber, to further bolster our defence (Barber is a former BFNL 17-and-under representative from 2022).

“The season opener against (albeit depleted) back-to-back premier Maiden Gully will be a test, but you have to play everyone at some point and until you see where everyone is at, it’s hard to tell. I will be busting for a round 1 win.”

PLAYER TO WATCH

Adele Barber: Coming out of the Strathfieldsaye Storm, this former BFNL 17-and-under representative is a promising defender who will combine well with Akeily Pearce, also “an awesome defender” to make the team very strong defensively.



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Inglewood



FOOTY FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1903-07; 1938-present. **GROUND:** Inglewood Community Sports Centre.
PREMIERSHIPS: 9 (1903, 1946, 1951, 1953, 1954, 1956, 1958, 1971, 1986). **PRESIDENT:** Tim Burthistle.
SENIOR COACH: Fergus Payne. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** 4th. **2023 BEST & FAIREST:** Bregon Cotchett.
2023 LEADING GOALKICKERS: Keelan Payne, Charlie McGaw (30 goals).

INGLEWOOD faces a serious test when the season kicks off – fourth in 2023, a first finals appearance in 20 years, and a first-time senior coach trying to help them go deeper into the season.

He is also trying to mesh 10 or so new players into a side which lost several of the Melbourne contingent that did the hard yards for the club last season.

But Fergus Payne, who joined as a playing assistant coach last year from Strathfieldsaye, is now the man at the helm of the Blues and held high hopes for 2024.

"I think the one thing which showed in the finals was our youth, and lack of experience – at 26 I was the oldest player in the side," Payne laughs.

"And now as playing coach at 27, I still am."

The resurgence of his team has been reflected by the club's strong pre-season and Payne's push for more structure on and off the field.

He said they regularly had 30-plus players at training, a serious step up from his first year at the club, when there were nights in the single digits.

"We want everyone to play well, but we also want smiles on everyone's faces, and that's what we are seeing this year," Payne said.

"One of the things I have been keen to impress on the players is from No.1 to No.22, everyone has a role and unless they do it to the best of their ability, the team doesn't function properly.

"It's all part of building a whole club where everyone fits – players, family, friends.

"And it's going to be a real luxury having more players than spots, so everyone will have to compete just to make the side, that always lifts the standard."



Inglewood's Cameron Martin among the pack.
Picture: Elizabeth Sinclair

So will recruits such as Mitch Conlan, a centre half-forward from Jerilderie, Liam Marciano, a dashing "high IQ small forward", and Will Allen, a tall centre half-back from South Bendigo.

Or rising star Gabe Nevins, a half-back and midfielder coming up from the under-18s. Last year on one memorable weekend he got best-on-ground in both on the Saturday, and then turned out for the under-18s interleague on the Sunday and was BOG again.

With Payne on the field, that also means

assistant coaches Nathan Angelino and Shaun Morgan will play key roles running game days.

At the same time Payne will return to the back line this year – where he has played most of his football – after being slotted in as a mid-forward in his first year with the Blues.

"It will also let me see the whole field during the game, so that with the key pointers and feedback from Shaun and Nathan at the breaks, I'll have a good grasp of where we are going," he said.

FROM THE COACH

"When I look around the club in 2024

I see a new era for Inglewood. Twenty years between finals, but for this group it's only been months since they got a taste for what the game is all about and that's where they want to be again at the end of this season. We are young but everyone learnt a lot in 2023 and will be bringing it with them this year."

KEY PLAYER

Mitch Conlan: Conlan will be an older head on a young team and play an important role in the forward structure. He is a big fella and will provide a focal point going forward, and he will be able to work alongside younger midfielders and forwards and give them support and options.

INS & OUTS

INS: Mitch Conlan, Liam Marciano, Will Allen.

OUTS: None.

NETBALL

AS far as coach Abbey Hayes is concerned, there is only one way for her girls to go – up.

Propping up the ladder for much of 2023, this is Hayes' first full year as coach, after helping out during the previous season while playing as team captain.

And right now she thinks things are looking

pretty good.

"We have had a good pre-season, and as well as our young players coming through, we have been able to pick up some new blood, particularly with people coming to the town, and now we are looking to gel as a playing group," Hayes said.

"We have a team structure and a good

game plan and that will only get better as we do more together.

"What I think we are really looking for now is to be a lot more competitive than we were in 2023 and if the commitment and attitude of the team is anything to go by, that's what we will be."

PLAYER TO WATCH

Emily Leach: A product of the club's junior program, she started playing A Grade in 2023. She is described as "very coachable" and is a player who has improved a lot from last year and should be a force in attack.



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Maiden Gully YCW



FOOTY FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1985. **GROUND:** Marist College, Maiden Gully. **PREMIERSHIPS:** 4 (1987, 1997, 2001, 2002). **PRESIDENT:** Chris Garlick. **SENIOR COACHES:** Shawn Filo and Angus Monfries.
2023 LADDER POSITION: 9th. **2023 LEADING GOALKICKER:** Brandon Dimech (24 goals).

THERE'S no confusion about what Maiden Gully YCW expects of new co-coaches Angus Monfries and Shawn Filo.

Because there is only one thing for the Eagles to do after their 2023 season – fly upwards.

The club last played finals in 2019, was competitive in the first two seasons post-COVID and in 2023 crashed to the bottom of the ladder.

Monfries knows there is a battle ahead but says “the reason you play footy is to play finals, and that’s what we are planning to do”.

Like the other teams whose seasons ended early, he is targeting that fifth spot on the ladder as a realistic opportunity and believed the club had the right mix to make it.

“We have been able to retain virtually every player from last season’s list and then added a number of key position players to give us that extra impact on field,” Monfries said.

After playing 211 games in the AFL with Essendon and Port Adelaide, there’s no doubt the playing co-coach knows a good side when he sees it.

“I think the combination of my experience as a player and coach, and Shawn’s outstanding track record as a country coach helps us understand where we are going this season with the team,” he said.

“The top sides in the competition look strong on paper, but we are aiming to be part of the action in September.”

Monfries said the club’s development of juniors gave it some depth, and although it wouldn’t have an under-18s this season, plans were under way to change that next year.

He said that with those coming through and the strong local presence, the coaching staff had the luxury of only needing to tweak



Maiden Gully YCW’s Cooper Hale in round 17 last season.
 Picture: Elizabeth Sinclair

the list.

That included Mitch Hough, who they worked with at Castlemaine and is joining them from Newstead after recovering from Achilles surgery.

“The attitude around the club is excellent and we have had strong numbers on the track

right through pre-season,” Monfries said.

“With Shawn calling the game from the sidelines and me playing across half-back, where I can help set up our forward momentum, I am looking forward to seeing how the changes we have made to the structure and game plan play out.”

FROM THE COACH

“We are building our season on the quality of our playing list and the combination of experience Shawn (co-coach Shawn Filo) and I bring to the club and a realistic understanding of where we come in and how we can most effectively and efficiently use the assets the Eagles have. This is a proud club and the work everyone has done in the off-season shows we have no intention of staying where we finished in 2023.”

KEY PLAYER

Josh Worsley: Now captain of the club, Worsley has put in a big summer to set himself up for a big year. Coming to the club from Bendigo as a junior in 2018, he has risen through the ranks (including two years as a AFL Victoria representative in the under-18s) and is set for a big year.

INS & OUTS

INS: Todd Pridgeon (Macedon), Mitch Hough (Newstead), Todd Delehay (Macedon), Declan Phyland (Macedon), Bryce Franzini (Kangaroo Flat), Adam Pollock (Newstead), Dylan Turner (Wycheproof), Jack McHutcheson (Wycheproof).

OUTS: None.

NETBALL

IT’S going to be a whole new ball game for back-to-back premiers MGYCW in 2024, with its all-conquering A Grade gutted by departures.

Premiership coach Adam Boldiston said he had only been able to retain his defensive unit, meaning this season will be the first in a rebuilding program that may take more than just one year.

“It was just one of those things – players left for studies, careers, personal time, family commitments and some seeking new challenges, and it all just happened at once,” Boldiston said.

“Fortunately our club has a lot of depth and we have been able to turn to our Bs and Cs and some of those girls have really stepped up.

“We have also picked up a couple of new players, but our real future is with the young ones who are now getting experience at the higher level in some practice matches and at training.”

Boldiston said that far from being the usual flag favourite, he would be happy if his new-look side finished mid-field – although he won’t complain if they do even better.

PLAYERS TO WATCH

Rachael Gray and Jayne Norton: The defenders, the last of the premiership team, will be the cornerstone of the 2024 side, providing leadership for the young group. Liv Hall, a 21-year-old coming from the Cs, will also be one to watch at the attacking end of the court as she has really impressed in pre-season.



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Marong



FOOTY FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1983. **GROUND:** Malone Park. **PREMIERSHIPS:** 3 (1989, 2022, 2023).
PRESIDENT: Darren Turnbull. **SENIOR COACH:** Linton Jacobs. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** 1st (Premiers).
2023 BEST & FAIREST: Richard Tibbett. **2023 LEADING GOALKICKER:** Brandyn Grenfell (110 goals).

AS much as you would like it to be, things are seldom as easy as 1, 2 and 3 – but that's the dream at Marong and coach Linton Jacobs is quietly confident his boys are as good a chance as any.

That's despite losing superstar forward Brandyn Grenfell to Nyah in the Central Murray league.

Grenfell kicked 264 goals at an average of 7.5 per game across the past two seasons – a huge hole in any line-up, but someone when someone does that in back-to-back flags, it's more like a massive chasm.

But Jacobs remains calm, convinced the depth and experience of his roster – plus a few, handpicked recruits – will more than compensate for the blow to his frontline.

One of the new faces who might be an option up front is Shaun Knott, who will play either centre half-forward or centre half-back.

Originally from Eaglehawk, Knott is joined by two others from there – a half-back workhorse called Sam Dean and Ryan Wellington, who kicked 56 goals in the reserves last season.

"We also have utility Cooper Hale from Maiden Gully YCW, Todd Davies from Numurkah and Gus Reade, who is a Marong kid coming back from Cairns," Jacobs said.

"After two flags in a row we know we have a huge target on our backs, and we know other teams have been seriously recruiting, but we can only look after our own performance so that's what we will do.

"Improvement comes from within, our pre-season has been outstanding, and new assistant coach Paddy O'Brien has been a fantastic addition.

"He took 2023 off but comes from Colbinabbin and is a very keen runner – of the



Marong's Jack McCaig gets a handball away.
 Picture: Elizabeth Sinclair

marathon type – and he has been a real hit with our running training after mixing things up, and he has kept the whole group engaged.

"At the same time our juniors keep rising through the ranks and they have been pivotal in our recent successes, guys such as Jack

McCabe, Riley Taylor, Jimmy Gadsen, Lachie Lee and Jonty Davis.

"The first four are all in their very early 20s, while Jonty is in the Pioneer squad, so as much as would love him in the team, we wish him every success with his football."

FROM THE COACH

"This season we have put a real focus on fitness. Paddy O'Brien has done a great job to ensure we are fitter than ever and that has been reflected in the pre-season and the fact everyone here knows e plan, knows how to win the big games and our depth through our reserves and 18s is phenomenal. Plus Nathan Devanny is taking over the captaincy from Corey Gregg, giving us a strong leadership group."

KEY PLAYER

Jack McCabe: He had a big year in 2023, his second season in the seniors, and has just completed a massive pre-season. Playing across half-back and on the wing he is a very tough midfielder who will run hard and play hard all day. He is a great example of the depth of the club – and of its future.

INS & OUTS

INS: Shaun Knott (West Meadows/ Eaglehawk), Sam Dean (Eaglehawk), Ryan Wellington (Eaglehawk), Cooper Hale (Maiden Gully YCW), Todd Davies (Numurkah), Gus Reade (returning from Cairns).

OUTS: Brandyn Grenfell (Nyah), Jake Ede (Harcourt), Patrick Gretgrix (Harcourt).

NETBALL

MARONG'S A Grade was so close to the holy grail in 2023 the players can still feel the frustration.

One game from the grand final and coming up just one goal short (49-50) to Mitiamo in the preliminary final was an agonising end to a hard-fought season.

So in 2024 the club is looking to one of the game's most decorated stars to take it that one extra step.

A five-time winner of league fairest-and-best awards across three leagues, Robyn Cunnington brings an impressive tally of experience as coach of the A Grade team.

Cunnington's previous coaching stints include Birchip-Watchem, Huntly and Marong, and also at interleague level for North Central and Wimmera Mallee.

This year she will double up as coach of Marong's A and B grades.

The Panthers will be determined to improve on last season's tally of 11 wins and a draw across the home-and-away series.

Also on the Panthers coaching panel are Georgie McGrath and Kim McCullough, C Grade and C Reserve; Brittany Hercus, 17-and-under; Erin Stewart, 15-and-under; Bianca Bourke, 13-and-under; and Lee Franklin and Kate Larkins, Minis.

The Panthers are on their courts at

Malone Park for the round 1 showdown with Mitiamo on April 13 – a rematch of that preliminary final which will tell the team just how the new season may unfold.

PLAYER TO WATCH

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Mitiamo

FOOTY FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1956. **GROUND:** John Forbes Oval. **PREMIERSHIPS:** 6 (1967, 1977, 1979, 1999, 2009, 2019). **PRESIDENT:** Michael Draper. **SENIOR COACH:** Jon Varcoe. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** 6th. **2023 BEST & FAIREST:** Luke Lougoon. **2023 LEADING GOALKICKER:** Jay Reynolds (31 goals).



MITIAMO was a club on the brink of the extinction abyss going into last season, and it was going to take a lot of hard work and community commitment to avoid the plunge into oblivion.

On field, it started with veteran coach Jon Varcoe raising his hand to help out, and then it flowed through the rest of the club, the town and the district until the sought-after stability was achieved.

Varcoe was faced with a shadow of a senior list and virtually nonexistent reserves side, and after some aggressive hunting for players and implementing a new game plan, by season's his side would finish one spot shy of the finals.

And that's an experience Varcoe now wants his players to have.

The four-time premiership coach wanted his boys to play finals and, in a perfect world, win a flag as well.

"We played our first practice game against Lancaster – the back-to-back premier from the Kyabram District Football League – and it was a good opportunity to see where we really are," Varcoe said.

"Although we didn't win it did give us a chance to blow out the cobwebs, it showed our players are engaged and responding to the game plan, and we did go in without eight to 10 who would be in our best 22."

"In the off-season we have picked up about 20 new players for the club, and at trainings we have been seeing as many as 50 players coming through – we now have 55 on the list."

Things at Mitiamo started turning around in the second half of last year as player fitness improved and the team started to build some chemistry.

That's where Varcoe wanted to resume in round 1 this season.



Mitiamo's Rhys Varcoe seeks a smother.
Picture: Elizabeth Sinclair

"The team still going around had got older, but we have addressed the age demographic, with a lot of younger players around the early 20s."

He said club and committee had worked hard to keep a local emphasis in the team

because they "want to be a community, family club".

"The league is also holding an Indigenous round in May and it will be our first time participating in this and we are planning some very special events to make a big day of it."

FROM THE COACH

"The story at Mitiamo has been one of continual improvement in a fun, family, club environment – this is a big part of the community. After looking at where we were at the end of 2022 to where we are today is incredibly rewarding for everyone involved at the club. This has been a tremendous result to come this far but we still have a long way to go to make the most of this recovery."

KEY PLAYERS

Mitiamo Football Club: Coach Jon Varcoe doesn't have any interest in suggesting his club has a star when he says he has 20, 30, 50, even more if needed who will train, play, recover, help out, do all the unseen hard yards. And there's a whole structure behind them doing the same. "Those are the key people at Mitiamo."

INS & OUTS

INS: Nathan Twigg, Zac Myers, J.Vinnicombe, Kia Coatsworth, Alex Lloyd, Jayden Mathews, Jake Price, Bryce Laird, Liam Shiell, Ryan Duncan, Jayden Talbot.

OUTS: Ross Turner, Duncan Proud, Jay Reynolds, Doug Thomas, Liam Jones, Tom Campbell, Jacob Carracher.

NETBALL

JEN Wilson showed she had lost none of that coaching magic when she returned to her home club in 2023 for a second stint at the helm of the A Grade Demons.

In her first coaching stint, she took the side to a flag and last year she got them to the grand final and within a couple of goals of glory, before going down to Maiden Gully

YCW.

"Hopefully we will be back there again, the girls are hoping to make amends and been working very hard on their fitness, putting us well ahead of where we were last year," she said.

"We still lack a bit of height but there are ways we can compensate for that."

PLAYER TO WATCH

Alicia Hay: Stepping up last season from the under-17s and B Grade, Hay had it all worked out by the end of the season and people were starting to go "oh, wow!" as

she started improving with every game. A very level-headed wing attack, she will have a lot of eyes on her this season.



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FOOTY FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1904. **GROUND:** Riverside Park. **PREMIERSHIPS:** 16 (1905, 1906, 1907, 1908, 1909, 1910, 1912, 1929, 1930, 1933, 1937, 1957, 1978, 1993, 2000, 2018). **PRESIDENT:** Mandy Dixon. **SENIOR COACHES:** Daniel Smith and Sam Gale. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** 7th. **2023 BEST & FAIREST:** Tyler McLeod. **2023 LEADING GOALKICKER:** Christopher Dixon (22 goals).

NEWBRIDGE co-coaches Sam Gale and Daniel Smith are looking forward to their second season in charge of the Maroons – because in many ways it will be more like a first for them.

Joining the club only in December 2022, the pair inherited a playing list all but locked in, a pre-season under way and a culture established.

Their side would finish the year at 4-12 – but that was last year.

Now the coaches have their eyes set on finals footy and recruitment has been the first big step.

Gale said that even though they lost Dylan Stevens (to Campbell Creek) and Matt Geary (returned home to Queensland) he believed the core group, plus five key new players, made Newbridge a 10 to 12-goal better side.

"We are being realistic about this, looking around and hearing the talk, you know everybody has lifted their roster and it is going to be a pretty tough season," Gale said.

"But we reckon fifth spot is wide open in 2024 and that's going to be our target – if we do any better we'll take that as well.

"Our pre-season has been solid, with no fewer than 20 at every training and perhaps one of the real plusses this year is our club depth – the reserves are looking very strong as well and that will put pressure on for spots in the seniors and everyone will have to lift to stay in the side."

Gale said a cornerstone of the club's finals' campaign was centred on some of the new faces in the line-up, such as Andrew Padbury, a forward with an impressive resume including VAFA, and brothers Jono and Ed Aujard, who also both played Amateurs.



Newbridge's Patrick Andrews pursues a tackle.
Picture: Elizabeth Sinclair

Jono Aujard is a midfielder who has played TAC Cup and Ed Aujard fits anywhere between the half-back and half-forward line.

They are joined by new playing assistant coach Tyler Constable, coming from Harcourt in the Ballarat league, someone Gale rated highly, considering him to have "star

potential".

"We reckon we have a good game plan and having run the full pre-season and had that first year, the players have got used to us and have really bored down into the program and we are very positive about the season and can't wait to get it started."

FROM THE COACHES

"We have used our first year for us and the players to get familiar with each other and what we expect and everyone at the club has responded well to that. We have recruited players we feel will help ignite us on the field, and we have a good mix of youth and experience and there is plenty for everyone at Newbridge to be excited about."

KEY PLAYER

Andrew Padbury: He is a real presence on the field and at full forward or centre half-forward will give Newbridge a genuine spearhead. He kicked 62 goals in a VAFA season for Old Scotch and has since played in the Eastern League and Kyabram District League.

INS & OUTS

INS: Andrew Padbury (Violet Town), Jono Aujard (Murrabit), Ed Aujard (Murrabit), Tyler Constable (Ballarat).

OUTS: Dylan Stevens (Campbells Creek), Matt Geary (Queensland).

NETBALL

NEWBRIDGE had a middling season in 2023, and with its record of 8-8 – going into the finals series on the back of two losses – it was no surprise when the Maroons bowed out in the first week of the finals action.

That's an incentive, however, which will carry over to 2024 and give the club's new A Grade coaches something to use as a carrot (or stick, depending on how the season begins).

Determined to climb higher this time around, the Maroons will be looking for big things from new co-coaches Kristy Gandy and Selina Holland, who will just be running the A Grade.

Among the players to watch at Newbridge this season will be goal shooter Kym Childs, wing attack Sarah McClusky, and midcourt ace Rachel Pettifer.

Newbridge's squad also includes Jorja Hufer, goal defence; Meg Jennings, goal

defence; Sarah Lovel, defence; Morgan McCormick, attack; Laura Knight, wing defence; and Hayley Martiniella, centre.

Also on Newbridge's netball coaching panel are Rachel Pettifer, B Grade; Emma Allen, C Grade; Madi Cleeland, C Reserve; and Jessica Baker, 15-and-under and 13-and-under.

Game one of the season will be at Bridgewater, who finished one game adrift of the Maroons in 2023, on April 13.

And like the Mean Machine, Newbridge will be looking to boost its performance under the goal ring as 2023's 703 goals won't be anywhere near enough.

PLAYER TO WATCH

Not supplied.



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Pyramid Hill



FOOTY FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 1995. **GROUND:** Mitchell Park. **PREMIERSHIPS:** None. **PRESIDENT:** Bruce Moon.
SENIOR COACH: Nathan Fitzpatrick. **2023 LADDER POSITION:** 2nd (Runner-up).
2023 BEST & FAIREST: Dylan Collis. **2023 LEADING GOALKICKER:** Will Perryman (41 goals).

IT should mark a big year, but losing grand finalist is perhaps the most hated label in football.

And coach Nathan Fitzpatrick knows there is going to have to be some real bite in the Bulldogs to get them back to that one day in September this year.

Pyramid Hill is one of those rare clubs that does nearly all its pre-season in another town, but the geographic spread of its playing roster makes Bendigo home until the real action begins.

Fitzpatrick, a Bendigo boy himself, was lured by good mate Zach Alford to the Hill as an under-18 in 2013 and he has been there ever since – and now enters his third year as coach.

Considering his club has not won a flag since 1950, the 16-point loss to Marong was a particularly bitter pill for players and supporters to swallow.

“On the upside, that game has left the boys pretty motivated and with more than half the squad made up of locals or long-term players, they are pretty hungry to get back there and turn it around,” Fitzpatrick said.

“We were so close, so we haven’t had to tinker with too much in our game plan, and we have added a swag of new, and familiar, faces to the squad in the off-season and only lost three from our grand-final side.

“Now we have a really good spread of experience and youth, with ages ranging from 20 to 35 and most players in the 20 to 30 bracket, and we are planning to be back there in September to end the drought.”

While Fitzpatrick’s career ended with a knee a few years ago, he managed to convince Alford to return this year and said he represented the “good players and good people we want at Pyramid Hill”.



Pyramid Hill's Jack Hickmott launches a kick.
Picture: Pyramid Hill Facebook

“When you look at how far and wide we are spread, it is obvious people are here because they want to be, not just for a pay packet,” he said.

Now the season is almost here, trainings are being split between Bendigo and

Pyramid Hill and the momentum is peaking at the right time.

Fitzpatrick, who left Golden Square in Bendigo to make Pyramid Hill his football home, is hoping 2024 will prove to be the club’s golden year.

FROM THE COACH

“The people who have joined us are genuinely invested in Pyramid Hill and have increased the team’s depth and bring success with them. With around 30 looking for a game I’m not looking forward to that first selection night. But we are hungry, there will be competition for places, which is always a bonus for any coaching team and hopefully we can consign 1950 – and the memory of 2023 – to the history books.”

KEY PLAYER

Zach Alford: While he is coming back from injuries he is a player Fitzpatrick describes as “the barometer” because he will be the club’s driver of intensity – on and off the field. As an experienced midfielder and forward player, his return to the Bulldogs has been well received and a big season is anticipated.

INS & OUTS

INS: Ben Knight (North Bendigo), Damon Hemphill (Modewarre), Mick Dundon (Seymour), Brady Dickins (returning), Jack Timmins (returning from ACL), Brad Ladson (returning), Jayden Cowling (Charlton), Jack Burns (Huntly), Bailey Scott (Modewarre).

OUTS: Declan Slingoe (Castlemaine), Tom Hetherington (Kerang), Billy Micevski (retired).

NETBALL

CHELSEA Emmerson is pretty pumped about her first year running the A Grade for the Bulldogs – and more than hopeful her side will go deep into the finals series.

In 2023 the team finished fourth, winning the elimination final before its campaign was ended the next week.

But Emmerson has hung onto five of

that team, got a couple of returning girls and picked up a few from other clubs.

“Aleesha Flanagan has been away a few seasons and is coming back from Nyah, while Bec McKnight returns after having a baby,” she said.

“We will also be able to move Imogen Broad back into the midcourt with the inclusion

of Abbey Dingwall to take her place in the defence.”

The 2023 C Grade coach and player will not be back on the court this year but she has whittled her line-up down to a core of nine and describes it as a very talented roster.

PLAYER TO WATCH

Darcie Tierney: Joining Pyramid Hill from Birchip, Tierney has been described as a “very quick and dynamic” forward who reads the play instinctively. She is able to run all day and should provide a real focus up the court.

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Leitchville Gunbower



FOOTY FAST FACTS

JOINED LEAGUE: 2010. **GROUND:** Leitchville Recreation Reserve and Gunbower Recreation Reserve.
PREMIERSHIPS: 2 (2017, 2018). **PRESIDENT:** Rob Gundry. **SENIOR COACH:** Shannon Keam.
2023 LADDER POSITION: 5th.

The season is full of promise.



IF Bombers' coach Shannon Keam was asked how his inaugural season at the helm was going after Round 5 in 2023, you'd probably hear the struggles of another season.

Especially after claiming the 2022 wooden spoon.

However, Leitchville Gunbower launched an extraordinary mid-season revival to catapult into the Heathcote District league finals series.

The Bombers bowed out in the elimination final to eventual premiers Mount Pleasant, but given the rapid improvement made under the new coach, the 2024 season is full of promise with big names returning home.

Keam said it took a while for the side to find their feet last year.

"We know we can play that up-tempo

style of footy, which suits our smaller running guys," he said.

"We've also been working on a few different ways that we can play in terms of having a plan A, B and C, but we probably feel that high-tempo style of footy that most teams like to play these days is probably going to be our brand."

Keam said the club had secured the talents of local players returning to the hangar.

"We've been blessed a bit where we've got some guys coming back on to the family farm in Charlie Hancock and Will Brereton," Keam said.

"They are both utility players who have been training well.

"Blake Dye is a local lad who has returned and is going to play in our forward line.

"Brady Hore is back at the club after returning from Strathfieldsaye. We're still up in the air about where we will play Brady, but he is the type of player we can utilise through the middle, off half-back, the wing or half-forward.

"He has trained in all positions over the summer, but we haven't cemented any specific role as yet for him. Overall we've been fortunate with getting some of our local contingent back.

"We've also got Max Hagan and Kyle Green, who have come out from the Echuca under-18s. They have both been training well and will put their hand up for senior selection.

"Brad Green is another new player we've got through a connection with the Hislop brothers and Fraser Buchanan, who is a small forward type and could also run through the midfield if required."

FROM THE COACH

LEITCHVILLE Gunbower was focused on retention and building on increased depth.

"To be honest, I don't think I've had to make a recruiting phone call in the new year," Keam said.

"We wrapped it up fairly early and went more for the sustainability of having a core local group."

The club has seen large numbers at training, with a gruelling player camp at Boort.

The players camp was an opportunity to bond and to build a "cohesive" team and demonstrated the high level of fitness the players have already got, thanks to a solid pre-season, the club said.

Welcoming lots of new faces and with minimal departures, the senior club is also planning on troubling the top teams this year. Leitchville Gunbower had two practice matches against Deni Rams and Diggers Rest in March.

INS & OUTS

INS: Declan Mahony (LGFC Juniors), Thomas Mahony (LGFC Juniors), Alfie Quinlan (LGFC Juniors), Mac Ryan (LGFC Juniors), Oliver Jones (LGFC Juniors), Saxon Dwyer (LGFC Juniors), Luke Garner (LGFC Juniors), Aaron Garner (LGFC Juniors), Campbell Wood (LGFC Juniors), Fynn McGillivray (LGFC Juniors), Fergus McGillivray (LGFC Juniors), Layne Trevena (Leitchville Gunbower Junior Football), Harvey Jackman (Huonville Lions), Lochlan Basham (Echuca Junior Football Club), Dallas Price (Echuca United), Brodie Park (Deniliquin), Max Hagan (Echuca) Kyle Green (Echuca), Charles Hancock (Shepparton), Brady Hore (Strathfieldsaye), Will Brereton (Scarborough), Fraser Buchanan (Moama).

OUTS: Hudson Fountain (Cohuna Kangas), Beau Trahar (Maryborough).



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Pioneers build on

A WHIRLWIND 2023 season for the Bendigo Pioneers culminated in one of their young footballers being selected with the No.1 pick in the AFL draft.

While much of the national football media's focus was on 18-year-old Tongala star Harley Reid, it was just another football season for the Pioneers.

Pioneers coach Danny O'Bree said the media attention was more about preparing Reid for AFL football.

"I guess from the Pioneers' point of view, we were probably a bit more under the microscope with how the program would continue to develop a top prospect," he said.

"Obviously Harley was touted pretty highly, but we've also seen a fair few players who fall off that perch pretty quickly, too.

"He probably gets even more attention now, everyone kind of wants a piece of him, which has got to be a bit challenging in itself and weigh a person down.

"It's something you have to learn pretty quickly, and it is probably more about teaching him those strategies.

"We aren't the ones who have to deal with the messages, the phone calls or social media.

"That media attention is absolutely a distraction for every person around the program or the club, and we know that West Coast are sort of dealing with that this year.

"For him to show that resilience and work through it and stay at the top of his game, it's very impressive."

O'Bree said that Reid's resilient and personable nature was a credit to the young footballer and his family.

"Harley is quite a resilient kid," he said.

"No one has really gone through that scrutiny here before and I'm not sure if they ever will again.

"Anything Harley did or said was analysed, so it's a huge credit to his family to maintain that grounded nature that he had, and the genuine human that he is.

"To keep developing Harley in a positive way, and to ensure that he was the No.1 pick, I'm very proud of our program."

Reid and his Pioneers teammates travelled to their coach's hometown Nyah last year, and O'Bree was stoked to show the young players where he was from.

"We definitely try our best to get up into our regional places," he said.

"It's pretty amazing that we can showcase our town to these kids, to show them where we are from and the reasons why we do what we do.

"Obviously, Harley was a pretty big drawcard last year, a few people sort of came from everywhere to come and have a look at the way we go about our training.

"We rely so heavily on our regional coaches and our regional connections, and relationships we have with teams and clubs in the region."

O'Bree hoped the opportunity to show the young players what the game of football means to the people across the region would encourage them to strive for more.

"Football is just the heart and soul of the community," he said.

"Particularly in our region, footy clubs and netball clubs, and the people within them, are so important.

"We hope our players can bring back better standards, or how to be humble and happy, maybe some different ideas surrounding how important the local footy club is, within the community.

"We're always optimistic at the start of the year, I feel I've had some really cool conversations with recruiters, off the back of our testing and practice matches about quite a number of our kids."

Harley Reid wasn't the only Pioneers first-rounder last year, as Lila Keck was picked up by Carlton in the AFLW draft with pick 7.

And the night wasn't done there for the Pioneers girls, as Geelong chose Bryde O'Rourke with No.23, while Keely Fullerton went to Gold Coast with No.36.

Girls coach Whitney Kennedy said getting three players drafted was fantastic for the program and for the players.

"It's just a really good reward for all of the hard work these girls put in," she said.

"That's not only last year, but in the lead-up to trying to get drafted, since they identified that that's what they wanted to do, and not just 12 months of work.

"It was actually really rewarding, because we had a bit of a challenging season last year.

"Currently, we try not to focus too much on wins and losses and more focus on player development."



Kennedy said the Pioneers had a real focus on creating a strong culture within their squad.

"When we speak to staff and list managers, a player's character is definitely one of the questions they ask, if not the first question," she said.

"They want to make sure that they're getting a really well-rounded athlete, not someone who can just play footy.

"They want someone who can build really good relationships with their peers and staff, buy into the culture, drive a culture."

Kennedy said working with the young

footballers was an extremely rewarding way to be involved in the sport she loves.

"Footy means so much to me," she said.

"I grew up absolutely loving footy, and I went to so many games, more than I'd even be able to count. I loved going to the MCG with my dad.

"I love playing but I'm one of many people who didn't have these opportunities.

"So to give these girls that opportunity is an absolute honour and pleasure, because they really just take it in their stride and I think they're just grateful for what's in front of them."

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Swan Hill Mayor Stuart King has a quick chat with Kerang's Troy Davis in last year's Central Murray grand final in his role as field umpire.
Picture: Noel Fisher



Murrabit club umpire Neil Hopkins has been registered with Central Rivers Umpires for a few years now.
Picture: Noel Fisher

Umpires are a tight-knit club

THEY'RE an important component of a simple equation when it comes to local sporting achievements: without umpires, none of it can happen.

The men and women who run out each weekend to officiate their chosen sport do it for a range of reasons, but recognition is often far down the list.

For Central Rivers umpires manager Brent Howden, the decision was made for him two decades ago.

"When I first started here, I didn't want to umpire football," he said.

"I just wanted to come down here and have a run around at training of an evening.

"It's a great way to get your fitness up, it's a worthwhile thing to try out if you're just interested in that side of things.

"But it basically got to a point where they were a little short and they asked if I'd be able to take on a game.

"I took it on with no dramas, and now, 20

years later, I'm still here doing it."

Howden said much had changed, including the strong social nature of the umpiring group.

"We are just like a footy club here," he said.

"The key differences being that we're a little bit of a smaller group, and that we obviously don't play football.

"We have 55 registered umpires, but we are looking to hopefully bring in a few more," he said.

"We still do social events and catch up outside of football. Throughout the off-season, we try to get together and do a few things as a group.

"It's not like three umpires just walk out there on a Saturday morning and plan to umpire however they'd like.

"It's the sort of thing where you have to have a lot of trust in the people around you. We've all got to be on the same page."

Umpires can earn between \$1000 and \$3600 for their efforts throughout a Central Murray or Golden Rivers season.

Howden said he and his fellow umpire coaches oversaw the selection process before each Saturday and tried to keep everyone happy.

"We need roughly 25 to 30 central umpires each week," he said.

"To cover the eight games that we oversee, we need a total of 24 umpires.

"We still need to have that flexibility in case people go away or are unable to umpire

for any reason.

"We've got guys from all across the region, spanning from Cohuna to Barham, Kerang, Murrabit – just everywhere we possibly can.

"We try to keep those umpires as local as we can, but there will have to be times that we have to make a tough decision.

"It doesn't always work, but when it does, it keeps everyone pretty happy."

The AFL's commitment to ensuring umpires are free from abuse at all levels, has translated to more respect for local umpires.

Howden said those hesitant to join would soon find they had the confidence to do the job.

"We're a very welcoming place for people to join in, we just want to help people out on their umpiring journeys," he said.

"Sometimes us umpires need a hand too, it's not just the people on the sidelines or the trainers and physios, we want to enjoy what we do as well.

"A lot of people always say that they'd never umpire, not even for a million quid, but it's really not that bad.

"The more people that we get joining up, the more people will realise they have the ability to help out.

"They might see little Johnny running out to umpire on the weekend and think, 'gee, if Johnny can do it, then so can I'."

Anyone thinking about trying their hand at umpiring this year can contact Central Rivers on Facebook, or via email at jessie.chester@afcentralvic.com.au

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Flemo names Top 50

IT might not be my idea originally – sorry Mike – but it's still one of the best at generating discussion.

Unlike last year, where a player had to have previously played in the Central Murray, this year the only qualification needed to be eligible for my top 50 is that each player must be named somewhere within the likely best teams contained within these pages – that is, they are confirmed to be playing at a club within the league this season.

That means that some new recruits have been included in this year's top 50. So please, before howling me down if somebody didn't make it, or should have been higher, remember most of us – me included – haven't witnessed everyone run onto the field in anger yet.

This list is neither right nor wrong, it is simply my opinion – and if you think it's easy, try it yourself!

– Shane Fleming

FLEMO'S TOP 50

1. Jydon Neagle (Balranald)

Was ranked No.1 last pre-season, and only enhanced his reputation across 2023. Will be desperate to lead the Roos to a premiership, and will need to be at his very best to do so.

2. Josh Nitschke (Kerang)

Is the prototypical modern midfielder with elite running capabilities and sublime foot skills. Is already the best player in the Central Murray's best team despite his young age.

3. Adam Baird (Kerang)

The first of the new faces to make this year's top 50, Baird comes to the Blues with an impressive resume that includes a Michelson Medal as the Bendigo league's best and fairest, along with multiple premierships and club best-and-fairests.

4. Joel Helman (Cohuna Kangas)

Has long been one of the Central Murray's most dominant players, and can hurt teams either on the inside or outside, with his attack on the ball and burst from the contest.

5. Jack Geary (Cohuna Kangas)

Another of the fresh faces to the competition, Geary will take over the coaching reins at the Kangas this season. His combination with Helman in the middle and across half back will be a sight to see this season for the Cohuna faithful.



NNW United's Joel Walsh has come in at No.13 of the best players in the Central Murray ahead of the 2024 season.
Picture: Noel Fisher

6. Jaxon Neagle (Balranald)

Quickly established himself as the most dominant intercept defender in the Central Murray last season and was one of the key factors in Balranald's rise to a grand final berth.

7. Jimmy Toumpas (Swan Hill)

Former Melbourne and Port Adelaide midfielder who at 30 years of age is still in his prime. Will have a major impact on Swan Hill's chances of playing finals.

8. Jayden Magro (Tyntynder)

Another new face that comes into the Central Murray with massive wraps. Has represented both the WAFL and NTFL in the past, and has been twice named in the NTFL's team of the year.

9. Jye Barry (Woorinen)

Climbed three spots from No.12 in last year's list after winning Woorinen's best and fairest yet again and finishing equal-seventh in last year's Jack Betts Medal count.

10. Nick Lang (Kerang)

Will go into this season as the competition's premier ruckman in my opinion, and provided he stays injury free, will show the Central Murray why he's rated so highly by season's end.



Josh Nitschke in action against Balranald in last year's second semi-final. Nitschke has been rated as the second-best player in the Central Murray. Picture: Tracy Roberts

11. Josh Williams (Tooleybuc-Manangatang)

Was the Central Murray's leading goalkicker all season until round 18. Dominated up forward in a team that gave him very little opportunity to flourish and it will be good to see what he can do in a more competitive side this year.

12. Arnold Kirby (Woorinen)

Returns to Woorinen after a year in the Ballarat league with Sebastopol. Kirby being back will make a massive difference to Woorinen's line-up.

13. Joel Walsh (NNW United)

Won his second Pat Phelan Medal (NNW United best-and-fairest) last season and was a big reason in their climb up the ladder with his attacking play off half-back.

14. Matthew Neagle (Balranald)

Like his brother Jaxon, Matthew was a big reason in Balranald's rise up the ladder last season. Dangerous midfielder who finds plenty of the ball and uses it well.

15. Darcy Hourigan (Mallee Eagles)

Another new recruit to the Central Murray, Hourigan arrives at the Eagles after leading Nairne Bremer in the Adelaide Hills league to their first premiership last season, with the key forward kicking 115 goals for the season.

16. Sean Hunter (Kerang)

Kerang young gun who took his game to a new level last season. His run and carry off half-back and hunger to take the game on makes him a player to watch.

17. Zac O'Meara (Mallee Eagles)

Won his first senior best-and-fairest last season and has found his place across half back for the Mallee Eagles. Looks set to explode in a more competitive Eagles outfit in 2024.

18. Brandyn Grenfell (NNW United)

Will be the key marking target the Demons have been crying out for up forward. Another player who comes into the Central Murray with massive wraps, having kicked 110 and 154 goals over the past two seasons for Marong.

19. Bradlee Pay (Kerang)

Kerang veteran who found a new lease on life with a move forward late last season. Dominated the preliminary final against NNW United, kicking four first-quarter goals to send the Blues through to the decider.

20. Marcus Wattie (Tyntynder)

After spending last season with Shepparton United, Marcus Wattie will return to his home club this season. Is one of the most dynamic midfielders in the league at his best and will give the Bulldogs some much-needed pace out of the middle.

21. Brodie Tonkin (Lake Boga)

Like Wattie, Tonkin will return to his home club and have an immediate impact on his club's midfield after playing high-level football, including stints in the VFL, TAC Cup and VAFA in recent seasons.

22. Lachlan Ross (Kerang)

One of the first picked in the dominant Kerang team, Ross is expected to play as more of a lockdown key defender this year.

23. Ben Fuller (Balranald)

Last year's leading goalkicker in the Central Murray will be hoping for another big season between the sticks for the Roos, as they are a much more dangerous team when he is on fire than not.

24. Jordan Wilkins (Balranald)

The Balranald ruckman will return for



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Woorinen women stand tall in finals

WOORINEN'S trailblazing focus on growing football opportunities for girls and women in the region led the club's women to a second-place finish last season.

In their first year playing football in the Central Victoria Football League's Women's competition, Woorinen lost just three games on their way to the finals.

It was a whirlwind season for the Tigers, who made it through to the competition's grand final the hard way after losing their first final to Castlemaine.

But following an eight-point win over Eaglehawk in the preliminary final, the Tigers met Castlemaine again and took the game right up to the eventual premiers.

The Woorinen women lost to the Blues by 17 points, but their luck may have swung the other way if their goalkicking had been more accurate.

The Tigers had a one-point lead at the first break, and really had Castlemaine on the ropes in the first half with more scoring shots.

But it took the Tigers until the fourth quarter to score a goal, and by that time the Blues had already piled on five of their own.

Coach Katelyn Hazlett said her side could walk away from the loss with their heads held high.

"I was really proud of our efforts on that night," she said.

"That was the best we'd done against Castlemaine all year, and throughout most of the game, we really controlled the play and had a lot of the possession.

"Unfortunately, we just couldn't get the ball through the big sticks."

But the loss didn't put too much of a dampener on the occasion, as Hazlett expressed how special the game was.

"It was a pretty special occasion, and it's really a huge testament to our team.

"This team got put together pretty quickly, so I think it was a pretty surreal experience.

"But now that we've had a bit of time to sit back and reflect, I think that we can all understand a bit more how special it all was."

Hazlett said she couldn't have dreamed of playing in an all-female grand final before joining Woorinen.

"Growing up, I thought that football was just for the boys," she said.

"I started playing maybe nine years ago, in the second year of Woorinen's youth girls.

"Back then that was all that we had, we would go down to Bendigo practically every week.

"We would be lucky to get maybe one or two home games. Now we have a full pathway for our girls right from under-12s, to



Woorinen's women break through their banner onto the field before the grand final.

youth girls, now a women's team where they can train at home and play nine home games.

"It's crazy to think that we can do this now, when this wouldn't have been an option only a few years ago."

It wasn't just Woorinen's women that made their way to a grand final, as their youth girls team took on White Hills in the Bendigo Junior Football League's decider last September.

The girls were unlucky in their loss, having fought back from a slow start to take the game up to White Hills.

Having taken over the youth girls coaching position from Jason Murphy for this season, James Downing said it was important for the youth girls to see the pathway forward.

"This year we've had six or seven girls

move onto our women's program," he said.

"It is a great pathway for girls and women to have in Swan Hill.

"Moving forward, we're really looking to bring that next wave of footballers into our youth team.

"I'd encourage any girls to come out and give it a shot. They can come out, pick up a footy and have a kick around.

"Even if they're just in it for training, they will get a great understanding of the game and the skills and will be shown the clear pathway that girls footy now has."

It's that pathway forward that has coaches excited at both women's and girls level, as Downing said.

"It doesn't matter if they're talking about the men's program, the women's program or the girls' program," he said.

"Woorinen is the one club and that is

Woorinen's women's team made the CVFLW grand final in their first season in the competition. Pictures: SAA Imaging



A junior-to-senior pathway is now in place.

shown through the support that we all get.

"We want them to be able to achieve their football goals, whether that is playing AFLW, VFLW or coming back and playing community footy, they need these pathways to be able to get there."

Hazlett echoed Downing's sentiment, and was excited by the prospect of Woorinen's female programs continuing to grow.

"I feel pretty lucky to have this opportunity, especially getting to work alongside the youth side," she said.

"Just knowing that they have the opportunity to take football as far as they wish to, and that they have the pathways to go all the way through.

"Hopefully one day we will be able to say that we've had our little youth girls, come all the way through our program and possibly even go further."

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