

The kids are alright; defence starts



BY LIAM DURKIN

Hi, I'm Troy Hamilton, you may remember me from such miraculous premierships as Mirboo North 2014, and Traralgon 2024.

While returning Maroons coach Troy Hamilton might have the job for life after doing what many thought impossible last season, the new season suddenly presents a new challenge for the reigning premier.

Hamilton had a fairy tale first season in charge, adding to his reputation of carrying the Midas touch.

Everything he touched turned to gold - at least from the preliminary final onwards last year, and intrigue will now surround if Traralgon can repeat the dose.

Will it be Richmond 2017 or Western Bulldogs 2016?

As it stands, there doesn't appear to be any reason why the Maroons won't be as strong or even stronger than they were in 2024.

Hamilton said there was no reason to fear his

side was resting on its laurels from six months ago.

"The preseason was really good, they were keen and probably working even harder and having longer sessions. We feel good about our fitness and feel good about our preseason," he said.

Traralgon will welcome Matt Northe back in a playing capacity this season, after he was sidelined with injury and confined to being the runner.

Assisting Hamilton on the bench will again be Dan McKenna and club legend Paul 'Jumbo' McCulloch, while out on the ground, Jackson McMahon and Dylan Loprese will oversee things.

Of most note among the absentees is ruckman Max Jacobsen, although Hamilton was confident Peter Strong and Tyler Anderson were ready to step up and help fill the void.

The Maroons have some long term injuries,

including luckless defender Joel Scholtes who will be out for two months, and Connor Scandrett with an ACL.

Tom Hamilton is expected to return after Easter, as is key forward Jacob Van Iwaarden from an achilles.

The outs hardly outweigh the ins however, and given the average age of the premiership team was just 21, logic suggests Traralgon should be primed to have another few tilts at the title.

The biggest question could well be internal motivation.

Winning a flag at a young age would have ticked a bucket list item for many, and could see a natural drop off in focus and overall engagement - especially come the middle of winter.

Again, getting back to the Western Bulldogs: Shane Biggs, Tom Boyd, Clay Smith and Fletcher Roberts were hardly heard from again after 2016.

Conversely, most of Richmond's team went on and kept winning.

One thing's for certain - these blokes won't be finishing third-last.

Coach: Troy Hamilton

In: Matt Northe (back from injury), Mitch Mustoe, Jake Cashmore, Beau White, Jacob Williams, Lachlan Pollard, Tyler Mudita (TTU), Chris Williams, Brayden Kokshoorn (both Churchill), Ryan Dickson (Rosedale), Zach Bastin, Melvey Podmore (Dusties), Damian Houg (West Footscray), Matthew Pearce (Lakes Entrance)

Out: Max Jacobsen (Morwell East), Liam Hahn (Caloundra), Hudson Leech, Neil Flanagan, Lachlan McDonald (Rosedale), Harry McDonald (Cowwarr), Adam Holland (Inverloch), Jai Moloney, Sid Cogan, Ewan Williams (Glengarry), Gabriel Wood (Kew), Archie Woodall, Clancy Snell (Mirboo North), Michael Geary (Yinnar)

2024 result: Premier

Two steps forward, one back, now what?



BY LIAM DURKIN

WILL this be the breakthrough season?

Morwell has presented an interesting case study since football resumed fulltime in 2022.

Have the Tigers improved or stagnated in that time?

There can be little doubt improvements have been made. You don't beat Leongatha twice in one season without getting better.

Numbers however don't lie, and the reality is Morwell has been a middle-of-the-road team with virtually the same squad for the last three seasons. Its ladder positions have been: sixth, sixth and fifth.

Granted the Tigers are still relatively young, most football plans run on a three-four year cycle, and those behind the scenes will be wanting to see tangible inroads made this season, rather than flashes of brilliance (beating Leongatha) meshed with moments of madness (losing to Maffra).

Returning for his third season as playing-coach, eternal optimist Boyd Bailey said he was confident things were slowly but surely trending in the positive.

"We are definitely on the right path, we have improved in some key areas last season and have fine-tuned some things in the preseason," he said.

"A lot of close games in 2024 was a positive and a negative. No one blew us out the water but we also couldn't put away or bury any sides either. We have focused on continuing to develop our offensive side of our game

and hoping if we get ourselves into a winning position in a game to close out the game earlier."

Morwell has topped up its list with some returning senior players, automatically injecting some experience.

Bullocking midfielder Anthony Rosato is back, as is ruckman Isaac Abas, while the Tigers will hope to get former VFL player and local Nathan Noblett on the park as quickly as possible following an unfortunate trip to Bali that saw him break his wrist.

Key position player Maclan McInnes has also joined from Trafalgar, looking to test himself at the next level.

"We have included a number of new players that I feel will help our team to take the next step and improve talent across the ground," Bailey said.

"The squad now has a great mix of experience and youth, we have recruited seasoned senior players into the side and backing in our young who have continued to show great improvement to take our side to the next level.

"Disappointing to lose Brownly (Tyler Brown, back to Yallourn Yallourn North) but we get Sam Walsh and Tommy Caille back which is unreal."

Morwell's list retention has been sound, and the added players should theoretically put them in a position where they can go from nine wins last season to 10 or 11 this season and get into finals.

Whether or not the Tigers are ready to do

damage in finals remains to be seen, but it could also present a simple case of exactly where Morwell sits on the premiership clock.

The question you have to ask is: How many Morwell players would get a game if they drove a short distance east or west down the Princes Highway?

While it is admirable playing and recruiting locals, it generally only gets you so far in the major league.

Morwell themselves will know this. Their last premiership (2014) had Tarkyn Lockyer in it.

The Tigers haven't won a final since then, and patience could be wearing thin in some quarters.

Spare a thought for anyone who supports Essendon and Morwell.

Coach: Boyd Bailey

In: Anthony Rosato (Thorpdale), Nathan Noblett (Noble Park), Isaac Abas (Morwell East), Tom Caille (West Footscray), Maclan McInnes (Trafalgar)

Out: Tyler Brown (Yallourn Yallourn North)

2024 result: sixth (9 wins, 7 losses)

Blake Couling and his Tiger teammates will hope to break into finals this season.



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