

# The hunter becomes the hunted

BY LIAM DURKIN

*The Devil bowed his head because he knew that he'd been beat,  
And he laid that golden fiddle on the ground at Johnny's feet.*

THOSE lyrics, taken from the Charlie Daniels Band classic *The Devil Went Down to Georgia*, virtually summed up the immediate aftermath of last year's Gippsland League Grand Final.

Much like Johnny, the young upstart fiddle player from the song, Traralgon celebrated while Leongatha commiserated, as their quest for a hat-trick of premierships was denied in somewhat unexpected fashion.

The Maroons now carry the golden fiddle of the Gippsland League, and interest abounds to see whether or not they can hold onto it.

The Parrots are again expected to provide solid opposition, and shouldn't be too far from a top three finish come Round 18.

This season will mark 10 years since Leongatha began their great run, which now sees them justifiably in the conversation of the league's greatest dynasty.

For the record, Leongatha has made the grand final every season since 2015 and won four flags. Had it not been for a virus, they probably would have won even more.

However, all good things must come to an end, and there will undoubtedly be many in league circles waiting to see if the Parrots indeed become a victim of their own success.

The players that have delivered premierships in the past are now a year older, and possibly a year slower, while others have sought challenges elsewhere.

As stupid as it sounds, challenges are sometimes needed to maintain interest. Winning has become so frequent at the Parrots over the last decade (less than 30 losses) it has likely become mundane.

With that in mind, players such as Aaron Hillberg, Josh Schelling and Jesse Burns are out, as is Jack Ginnane, moving to Inverloch-Kongwak.

Of all players to leave the Aviary, Ginnane would be just about the last one you'd expect.

Are the Parrots starting to slowly unravel? There will be nine other clubs certainly hoping so.

What those clubs need to remember though is this: Leongatha still has the big Number 20 (Ben Willis) hitting it to the big Number 8 (Tom Marriott).

They'll also have Buln Buln spearhead Patrick Ireland inside 50 when his VFL schedule allows, and maybe even favourite son Dyson Heppell fresh out of the AFL.

A team that will have reason to feel confident against Leongatha, and Traralgon for that matter, is Morwell.

The Tigers rolled the Parrots on both occasions last season, and drew with their traditional Valley rival.

It certainly hasn't been boring at Tigerland the last three seasons, with Morwell consistently hovering around the middle of the table, capable of extraordinary wins one day, and unexplainable losses the next.

When asked what the issue was last season, one Morwell player simply referenced Italian soccer manager Gennaro Gattuso's famously simplistic press conference.

Not far from Morwell is Moe, who in turn never fail to be unwittingly tangled up in some sort of misfortune.

Just when everything seems to be going well for the Lions, it suddenly doesn't.

Moe was 6-1 heading into Round 8 in 2022, and then won two games for the rest of the year.

In 2023 they finished equal first and then nearly went out in straight sets.

Last year they beat Traralgon in the qualifying final, then lost to the same opponent by 10 goals in the prelim.

If there is a curse dating back to 1967, the long-suffering Moe faithful will be hoping new coach Leigh Pohlke is the man to lift it.

A team that has experienced similar shortcomings in recent seasons is Wonthaggi.

The Power lost the 2022 preliminary final narrowly to Sale, and the grand final the following year to Leongatha.

Last season saw a remarkable display of player management on the part of Wonthaggi playing-coach Jarryd Blair.

The Power had no players in the first half of the season, but got most of them back to win eight of their last nine games to reach the second week of finals.

If Blair can get a better run with availability this season, Wonthaggi might just be the team to beat.

Key midfielder Isaac Chugg hasn't gone anywhere, despite his home state of Tasmania publically announcing his return. If anything, the Power's list is as strong as it's ever been this decade.

Not many work more diligently on a list than Sam Anstee at Sale.

The Adrian Dodoro of the Gippsland League did it again this offseason, swooping in and nabbing Ashton Wright away from Maffra and out of Peel Thunder in Western Australia.

Nothing like making the Sale-Maffra rivalry even bigger.

Jack Johnstone (also a former Maffra player) enters his fifth season at the helm as Magpies coach, and his immediate challenge appears to be winning at least one final after consecutive early exits.

Fortunately for Sale, they have someone called Shannen Lange.

The midfielder was last year labelled the greatest Magpie ever seen by one prominent club historian. High praise indeed given the calibre of players who have pulled on the black and white.

I personally would also have to rate Lange the best player I've seen in my time following the league, surpassing fellow Sale great Kane Martin.

The Magpies have certainly produced some outstanding players.

Two of them are still going well into their twilight years - Shane Fyfe and Chris Laverty, who are just one game away from reaching the incredible mark of 700 combined club matches.

Someone who has played many games against the pair is Maffra legend and senior games record holder Daniel Bedggood.

Having enjoyed multiple premiership success, Bedggy is now facing another year helping develop the next wave of Eagle stars.

Development of a different kind will take place at Drouin, as the Hawks vacate their venue for resurfacing works for most of the season.

In many ways, results are almost irrelevant for Drouin this year, and few could criticise the club if it decides to write off the season.

Their western counterparts Warragul will look to cause a few headaches, as will Bairnsdale at the other end of the geographic line.

The Gulls should be stronger, the Redlegs perhaps not so; although history suggests any points gained at Bairnsdale City Oval seldom come easy.

It honestly feels like a whole new world when you drive into Bairnsdale.

Neutral supporters found themselves in a twisted paradox on Grand Final day last season, for supporting the underdog meant you had to barrack for Traralgon.

While the heart cried no, the head said it was time to see someone other than Leongatha win a flag.

The Maroons' victory was splashed across the front of this publication as 'the game of their lives', and the question now is this:

Has a new devil emerged in Georgia?

**Ladder prediction:** Traralgon, Wonthaggi, Moe, Leongatha, Sale, Morwell, Bairnsdale, Warragul, Maffra, Drouin.



Moe will hope to have reigning league medalist Riley Baldi available as much as possible. Baldi is playing in the VFL with Casey this season.



Marlon Neocleous is one of a handful of exciting young Traralgon players.

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