

The Screaming Eagle

Talks to new Eagle's Senior Women and Under 16 Coach Simon Hickey



Screaming Eagle

Just a week or two back I was interviewing a new coach in our midst, Nathan Cooper-Brown. Today I am fortunate enough to get the opportunity to speak with another coach new to Diamond Valley, Simon Hickey.

Hi Simon, thanks for talking to me. As I said, a couple of weeks ago I interviewed another new coach in Coops, who tells me he is a private schoolboy with a hyphenated surname. Now I know you haven't got a hyphenated surname, but what about your schooling, any silver spoon stuff there for Simon Hickey?

Simon Hickey

No, not a chance, I was a St Peter and Paul's Primary School boy. Once I finished there, I did my secondary schooling at Whitefriars College and before you say hang on it's a private school, Coops went to Wesley, I'm a far cry from that haha!

Screaming Eagle

A man who pre-empts my questions, I like that! So tell me about your start in basketball?

Simon Hickey

For me it all started at St Peter and Paul's Primary School in Doncaster, I was around six or seven and just loved it. I can clearly remember my first game, it was played on the outdoor court at the school and it was littered with jump ball after jump ball, with the final score line reading 2 to 0. My mum was the coach and as you can imagine, it wasn't a highly skilled contest.

Screaming Eagle

Hmmm, your mum was the coach, is that where you learned about nepotism? Only kidding. So how did that first season finish up?

Simon Hickey

I think we ended up winning the grand final so it was a great start to my basketball career. And nepotism? Far from it, she had plenty of other favourites in the team before me.

Screaming Eagle

Your mum had other favourites before you? I reckon there's a Doctor Phil episode in there somewhere! Did you play any other sports as a kid?

Simon Hickey

I had a dabble at cricket and footy. I was all set for inclusion in a Hawthorn Little League game back in grade 6 until they worked out I was too old for it. Shattered to say the least, but it was probably the catalyst that said basketball was for me.

Screaming Eagle

I remember grade 6, the best four years of my life! What about studies at school, were you the brainiac that didn't have to study, or did school get in the way of a good day of sport?

Simon Hickey

I would like to think I did pretty well academically. I certainly had to work for my grades but indeed I also made sure there was plenty of time for sport.

Screaming Eagle

So tell me about your move into representative basketball.

Simon Hickey

I started domestic basketball with Doncaster up next to the footy oval at the end of Doncaster Road a year or so after my first game at primary school, and it was from there that Bulleen approached me to compete in this thing called Friday night representative basketball. It was a massive thrill to be noticed by another club and be actively chased to play rep ball.

Screaming Eagle

So let me get this right, you clearly said Bulleen actively chased you to play with them? I have the words 'poaching' and 'illegal' running around in my head!

Simon Hickey

Just don't mention the 'p' word haha. I only played there for two years, bottom and top age 12's and had only a reasonable level of success. But a change in home fronts meant a move to a new club and the Blackburn Vikings was where I ended up playing from bottom age 14's right through to their senior program.

Screaming Eagle

Blackburn was very strong in the senior program back then, if I recall playing in the top division, so you couldn't have been a slouch. Tell me about it.

Simon Hickey

Most of my senior career was mainly involved playing in the MMBL on a Wednesday night and I can remember some great games at the old Albert Park stadium. Blackburn also had men's and women's teams playing in what was known as the VBL and CVIBL which ultimately, after a couple of versions on the way through, became the Big V as it is known today. I can't say I cracked it into the first team

in seniors too often, but being able to train with the calibre of players was a great opportunity indeed. It was a great environment and a good time to play basketball.

Screaming Eagle

A few Diamond Valley guys were involved at Blackburn before switching over to the Eagles, Liam Santamaria and Darren Holness. Did you ever play with these guys?

Simon Hickey

Liam came to the club just as I was really starting to get my teeth into coaching so I didn't get to play with or against Liam. He was great to watch play though. Super competitive which is a great trait to have as a baller. Darren Holness ruled the paint. Great player and although I never cracked a game alongside him I was fortunate enough to share the court during training. As I said before a great experience with such good quality players, and people at the club then.

Screaming Eagle

What about title success, any titles along the way in juniors or seniors?

Simon Hickey

As I mentioned before, season one into ball and I had a championship.... Great start for sure! I think there were a few more along the way but to be honest I can't say I recall too many. I know I have some trophies packed away that allude to a respectable playing career but nothing to write headlines about.

Screaming Eagle

As I said to Coops, playing to coaching isn't just a natural transition, when did you first get involved in coaching?

Simon Hickey

I was coaching for a long time before I finished playing basketball, I actually started about three years before I finished school, coaching an under 14 boy's team in the EDJBA domestic comp, so the transition from playing to coaching so to speak was pretty easy, it just developed over time. In my second year I was coaching rep ball for Blackburn and coached juniors for not far short of 15 years, ranging from under 14's to under 20's, boys and girls, lower down the ranks through to VC.

Screaming Eagle

Successes as a junior coach? Come on, brag it up.

Simon Hickey

We smashed it in Adelaide.....one of my early rep teams trekked across the border and had a fantastic tournament over summer one year. I also remember get pipped at the post with that same group at under 20's VC. Beaten by a better team on the night but alas my coaching accolades are a little bare at the moment.

Screaming Eagle

So what did you do when you finished playing?

Simon Hickey

I didn't actually 'finish' playing, just at Big V level. I did play socially and also had a go at footy. It was a real blast doing something completely different to basketball but given my love of coaching basketball I knew in the end I had to make a choice, and basketball won.

Screaming Eagle

How did the move into senior coaching come about?

Simon Hickey

After a season with an under 18 girl's team at Blackburn I transitioned into the senior program in a role of Assistant Coach to Jaysn Harvey. That team was playing CVIBL and competed throughout Victoria when teams like Echuca, Maffra and Sale all still competed in the comp. It was a great season and I learnt a heap, even took the reins in one game down at Heyfield where despite being underdogs, we came away with the points. After leaving Blackburn and whilst coaching at Doncaster I was approached by the then Director of Coaching Andrew Parkinson to see if I had any interest in being his assistant at Maccabi. Having seen Parky as a player growing up I jumped at the chance to work alongside him.

Screaming Eagle

Your first season at Maccabi you took the team to second on the ladder in your conference to get knocked out in the quarter finals, not a bad start to a senior career?

Simon Hickey

Well I could claim the accolades but being an assistant as I was I don't think I can take all the credit. Certainly was a great experience though and got to work with some great people there too.

Screaming Eagle

Your first year at Hawthorn in Div 2 women in 2005 would have seen you come up against legendary Eagle's coach Peter Gay. The Eagle's had a ripper year in 2005 winning the title, do you remember playing against the Eagles?

Simon Hickey

Certainly do. Diamond Valley was the benchmark team all year long and rightly so. Well coached, well drilled, super quick, they had it all. Great coach too.... I was actually talking to Pete the other day. Great bloke indeed.

Screaming Eagle

Your second year at Hawthorn in 2006 saw you finish top of the ladder, but you fell short in the grand final series to Craigieburn. The good news was you won Big V Coach of the Year. That's an award DV is familiar with, with our coaches winning 11 in the last 9 seasons. Tell me about that year with one massive high in a personal award and a massive low in losing the grand final series.

Simon Hickey

Do I have to talk about the loss? Simply put, we got beaten by a better team in both games of the Grand Final series. They out muscled us inside the paint and made the most of their 40+ free throw attempts in each game. During game one Hannah Lowe suffered a fairly decent cut on her shooting hand which unsettled both her and the team. She is a true competitor as well so she played on regardless but it sure had an impact. Game two was at Xavier College and regardless of a massive comeback late in the game on the back of a super hot streak by Amanda Champion, we just couldn't bridge the gap. Warren Taylor (Craigieburn's Coach) certainly did his homework and they were well deserved winners. As far as the COTY Award.... Sure it was a great personal reward, but I would trade it any day for the banner that hangs at Craigieburn's Stadium.

Screaming Eagle

You moved over to Ringwood and were assistant coach of their long term senior women's coach Tim Mottin in 2009, coincidentally the same year they started their Youth League women's team. Unfortunately there was no Cinderella story here for them with a bottom of the ladder finish and a zip and 20 win loss record.

Simon Hickey

Yea I had been an assistant to Tim Mottin for a few years with the Ringwood Division 2 team so I was a spectator to what was ultimately a tough first season for the team in the Youth League competition. At the end of that year I decided to put my hat in the ring to coach the Youth League team and was successful in getting the gig.

Screaming Eagle

Despite the first season, you took over as Youth League coach in 2010 and the next three seasons saw a prominent rise up the ladder culminating in a final's berth in both 2011 and 2012, getting knocked out of the 2012 race coincidentally by Diamond Valley. How hard was it to take over the team after such a disastrous start in 2009?

Simon Hickey

To be honest it actually wasn't as difficult as you may have thought. The core group now knew what senior basketball was all about so with the addition of a couple more players to the roster things began to turn on the positive side. Ultimately it was putting belief into the players that started to turn things around and that coupled with a desire to improve and coaching staff who pushed for the improvement I think the two finals campaigns were reward for some great work by all involved..

Screaming Eagle

You had 2013 off, why?

Simon Hickey

Around the time of resigning with Ringwood I was actually very ill and spent almost two weeks in hospital. I had been in consultation with Tim Mottin (SCW Coach) and he was due to be away for a reasonable amount of the pre Christmas pre season. The program needed someone who could look after both teams for a period of time and I just wasn't in a healthy enough position to do the program justice. I felt it better for both parties that I step aside and allow the club to find someone who could.

Screaming Eagle

You've also been involved in the state system, in 2012 as under 16 Vic Metro women's selector, in 2013 as Vic Metro women's state Development Coach and a NITP Development Coach, and in 2014 the Assistant Coach on the under 16 Vic Metro team. How did the state gigs come about?

Simon Hickey

Actually it was prompted by a conversation I had with Peter Gay at a Big V Pre Season tournament at Albert Park. We were just talking and he spoke highly of the State Program and about how much he had learnt. I left the conversation thinking to myself that if I really want to both challenge and improve myself then that sort of environment sounded like the place to do so. I was lucky enough to work under and alongside some great coaches too. Jonathan Goodman was a fantastic mentor to have and to be able to work with the likes of Sam Thornton, Jai Cesari and Mark Alabakov I cannot speak highly enough of my time so far within the State Program.

Screaming Eagle

Mr Eagle hears there is a Mrs Eagle in Simon Hickey's life, and one who could play a bit and not too long ago. Tell us about Mrs Hickey?

Simon Hickey

She's great....Allison or ADS as some may know her has been super supportive of everything I have done on and off the court since we meet almost seven years ago. We celebrate our second wedding anniversary in late November so I need to make sure I find her a more that appropriate gift to celebrate the occasion! As far as her playing career, well it dwarves mine. We have some pretty impressive memorabilia on the wall from her 250+ game Big V career at Ringwood as well as her National Championship she won while playing for Ballarat in the SEABL competition. She has plenty to be proud of from her playing career and she has been a great sounding board for me throughout my coaching career so far. Ultimately I wouldn't be able to do what I do without the support of such a fantastic, beautiful and understanding wife.

Screaming Eagle

Ads is gunna read this isn't she (Simon nods), thought so! Seriously though, any chance we'll see her suit up or even pull on a whistle?

Simon Hickey

Not a hope of her pulling on a whistle.... You may catch her helping me out at training with the 16 girls though. She is a great thinker of the game so I'd be crazy not to use her knowledge. As far as playing, never say never, though I'm not sure she would want me as her coach.

Screaming Eagle

So what pays the bills for Simon Hickey, what's your day job?

Simon Hickey

I am an Area Manager for a plumbing supplies company called Burdens Plumbing. We have eight stores in the Melbourne Metro and two Regionals. I pretty much act as a mentor for our Store Managers... a sounding board for them as well as being a conduit between our Head Office and stores.

Screaming Eagle

Now for the pressure questions! You've been around the block a couple of times, who was your best ever coach and why?

Simon Hickey

Trevor Cook. Trevor was my first coach at Bulleen. Tough, hard but fair....He was instrumental in helping me to develop a great work ethic in the game. He was also such a fantastic teacher of the game.... Great guy too.

Screaming Eagle

Since coaching yourself, which three players, juniors or seniors, did you enjoy coaching the most, not necessarily the best, but the most enjoyable to coach and why?

Simon Hickey

Tough question.... How do you pick a favourite...?? Can I say some teams too?....

Screaming Eagle

You can say what you like, it's your interview!

Simon Hickey

The under 14's I started with at Blackburn and followed through to 20's were a great group of guys. They were all prepared to work for each other in the true sense of a team. It was rewarding to see them all develop in their own way whilst all contributing to a successful team. I still see a few around the traps and I know most of them are still great friends to this day.

You could also add the under 14 girls from Doncaster back in the day. They were a group who just loved to work hard and they were super receptive to my coaching style. The families associated with that team were also great people too.

And lastly, if I'm picking a player can I select actually... it's too hard to pick just one. I love coaching players who simply want to work hard to improve their own game. Whether they are naturally gifted or not, as long as they have a desire to improve then how can you not enjoy coaching players like that?

Screaming Eagle

Great answer, and very true! Of all the players you have ever coach or coached against, who were the absolute best three and why?

Simon Hickey

Dean Rzechta – Maccabi. Super athletic and super motivated to improve. Fantastic player off court too.

Mel McCormack-Rees – Blackburn. She got the most out of her ability by sheer persistence. Great player who loved making other players better too.

And..... Well I have coached some great players throughout the State program over the last few years and I am sure a few of those are going to go on and have very successful careers in the game but I'd like to think the best is yet to come actually.

Screaming Eagle

Can you pick the three absolute best players you ever played with and why?

Simon Hickey

Danny Evans – Blackburn Vikings. He and I shared similar roles and we both pushed each other to better ourselves. While neither of us were superstars, though Danny did have a level of success at SEABL, we both got the best from each other.

And does playing a scrimmage at MSAC count?

Screaming Eagle

Sure, why not.

Simon Hickey

That involved the likes of Parky and his brother, Mark Dickel (NZ National Player), Pero Vasiljevic (NBL) to name a few count? I distinctly remember being posterized by Pero in a dunk that was simply sensational to watch.

Screaming Eagle

So here we are at Diamond Valley. Tell me how it came to be that you are under 16 girl's and senior women's in 2014, how did it all come about and what attracted you to Diamond Valley?

Simon Hickey

After having the year off I got thinking about what I wanted to achieve as a coach. I also thought that if I am going to coach in the under 16 State Program then I should look to actually coach in the age group. So after a few conversations between Al McAughtry and myself I was lucky enough to be offered the under 16/1's. The Seniors was a little different. After thinking about it and talking to my wife weighing up the pros and cons I accepted the role of head coach of the State Champ women team. I am looking forward to both roles for sure.... plenty of challenges but also some great rewards if the hardwork continues.

Screaming Eagle

I asked Coops this question as well, you've been at Diamond Valley five minutes, what are your first thoughts of the place and how does it compare to other associations you have been at?

Simon Hickey

Everything and everyone has been fantastic. The level of support offered has been super impressive and the wealth of quality coaches, and people, around the club is something Diamond Valley should be very proud of.

As far as comparisons.... never been a big one of trying to compare to be honest. Every club has a tough job attracting good people to their club and I think if the club can continue to do such a job then the rest has a very good chance of taking care of itself.

Screaming Eagle

In the senior program you'll be working with Tom Bandilovski who is the Youth League women's coach, have you and Tom crossed paths before?

Simon Hickey

I haven't actually to be honest. Tom is super passionate about making our Senior program successful just as I am, so I am looking forward to working alongside him to make sure that happens. I saw some of his work with the juniors throughout last season and he is a tough taskmaster but he is also highly skilled with his knowledge of the game.

Coincidentally Tom and I were playing in the same over 30's comp on a Thursday night this season but we hadn't meet on court before both of us had to put our efforts into senior trainings on a Thursday night instead.

Screaming Eagle

Mr Eagle has seen you at a training here and there, and whilst firm, you seem fairly balanced and in control of yourself. Coops told me he was a bit of a jumper and shouter, what can we expect from you on game day? Mr In Control, or the tech foul kid?

Simon Hickey

I would like to think I am in control. I know I have an example to set for the players so you can hardly be losing control and expect them to maintain focus too. Having said that I will certainly go into bat for my team if I think we are getting hard done by.

Screaming Eagle

You've picked your under 16 team girl's for 2014, tell me about the team, it seems to have a good mix of bottom age and top age, how is it looking for 2014?

Simon Hickey

I think the whole under 16 program is looking good actually. We have four teams who are all going to be very competitive in their respective competitions. As far as my team goes I think I have picked a team who will be tough to defend as well as being tough defenders themselves. We go into the season ranked 9th so we will certainly have a number of teams gunning for us but that also means we have every opportunity to be very successful if we put in the hard work. I will certainly be looking forward to seeing them develop throughout the year, but so far they have all responded to my coaching style very well indeed.

Screaming Eagle

I usually finish with a question but being so new it might be difficult for you to answer but we'll have a go anyway. If you could magically click your fingers and have something done, changed, fixed and absolutely in place at Diamond Valley right now, what would it be (don't be afraid to dream big)?

Simon Hickey

I know Coops spoke about the multi-million dollar training facility so he sort of stole my thunder. I would just be happy with some space around Court 2, 3 and 4 to be honest. We are training on court 3 every Sunday and with the tempo I want my girls training at I think the parents may need to wear some protective gear if they plan on staying to watch!

Screaming Eagle

Haha, great answer, and one I trust the parents will take notice of!

So another new coach and another interview done. Some will tell you that having so many what I would call 'professional' coaches within our midst and all high quality is pretty lucky. But when you look at one of the common denominators mentioned in every interview so far, and that is Al McAughtry, then Mr Eagle suspects that it isn't all luck.

We have a growing list of high quality, very experienced coaches being drawn to our program and the big winners are the kids who get to play every week under their expert tutelage, with Simon now adding to that list.

Simon, thanks for the interview and for giving so freely of your time to share your story, The Screaming Eagle salutes you.