

FOOTY FOCUS



BFL **LVFL** **HDFL** **AFL** **VFL: BENDIGO BOMBERS** **TAC CUP: BENDIGO PIONEERS** www.bendigoadvertiser.com.au

It's not all about winning

LUKE WEST

THE Bendigo Pioneers are no different to any other football club.

They want to win games, but for the Pioneers, the win-loss ratio at the end of the TAC Cup isn't the be-all and end-all – far from it.

For the Pioneers, they are all about the development of young talent in the region, and giving that talent the best opportunity to forge a career in the AFL.

Wins have been few and far between for the Pioneers in recent years – they have won just 17 of 87 games since the start of 2006.

Long-time Pioneers regional manager Ray Byrne doesn't shy away from the fact that tally of wins is well below those of Bendigo's other TAC Cup country rivals, Geelong, Gippsland, Murray and North Ballarat, who have all won at least 50 games since 2006.

But that's neither here nor there for Byrne.

With the Pioneers' No.1 priority being development, what's more relevant to Byrne is that from the 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2009 national and rookie drafts, the Pioneers have had 11 players added to AFL lists during those lean years on-field.

That's not bad, considering the Pioneers have finished 12th, 10th, 11th and 12th in the past four years.

In comparison, the Gippsland Power has finished no lower than

fifth in the past four years, but had just five more players drafted.

The Murray Bushrangers have played in two of the past four grand finals, but have had only seven more players drafted than the Pioneers since 2006.

And North Ballarat has played in the past four finals series, but the Rebels have also had just seven more players drafted than the Pioneers since 2006.

Sure, Byrne would love to have had more wins through that time and for the young Pioneers players to have had a chance to experience TAC Cup finals.

But if the club is producing AFL players, plus those who go on to play VFL or return to their local leagues and have an impact, to be honest, Byrne isn't fazed where the Pioneers finish on the ladder.

"The kids know where they stand with it all, and over the past few years, even though we've been getting beaten, the morale around the club has been terrific," Byrne said this week.

"Yes, we've had a couple of kids leave because they've had pressure from their home clubs, but that happens everywhere, and we know we're not the flavour off the month everywhere.

"We know we're sometimes seen as taking little Johnny who has been a superstar at his club since he was 10, then all of a sudden he's with us.

"But at least the clubs are



INSTRUCTIONS: Bendigo Pioneers coach Mark Ellis.

identifying the kids, and what we do is put a bit of polish on them.

"Yes, we'd love to be winning games of footy, but what goes around comes around. We've got a really good crop of under-16 kids coming through."

While the Pioneers may have their critics, the TAC Cup is now the pathway into the AFL for Victorian hopefuls. At last year's national draft, 37 players came via the TAC Cup, including Pioneers pair Dustin Martin and Jordan Williams.

It's vastly different these days to when Byrne was a Golden Square teenager with a dream of playing in the VFL in the early '70s.

Coming from Bendigo, Byrne was zoned to Carlton. After playing in

Golden Square's 1972 Bendigo Football League premiership, he was recruited to the Blues in 1973.

Byrne went on to play 219 games for Carlton, Geelong and Collingwood, and was a part of four losing grand final teams.

"I reckon if they had this system in when I was just starting out, there would have been a lot more players go down and have a crack in the VFL," Byrne said.

"These days with this system, the players are better educated about what league footy is all about."

Since the Pioneers joined the TAC Cup in 1993 under coach Tony Southcombe, they have had 49 players selected at either the AFL national or rookie draft.

Of those 49 players, 18 have played more than 50 games, while seven – Michael Braun, Dean Solomon, Brent Guerra, Josh Hunt, Adam Selwood, Rick Ladson and 2007 Rising Star winner Joel Selwood – have reached the pinnacle of playing in a premiership.

In what is their 18th TAC Cup season, in which they have built an overall 120-211-2 record in 333 games, the Pioneers are again coached by Mark Ellis, who has held the role since 2005.

Byrne says Ellis epitomises the Pioneers' philosophy of development ahead of success, perhaps at the expense of his own reputation.

"He got the TAC Cup coach of the year last year; they don't just hand that out lightly," Byrne said.

"He follows all the criteria that is expected of a TAC Cup coach, with things such as no flooding or tagging. He will play kids out of position to help them get drafted, and that could be the difference between winning and losing.

"He will look at things like, well, he can't play full-forward for us because if he's going to play league footy, it will be as a half-forward or a winger.

"Mark does a good job and the kids and parents all respect him."

While Byrne doesn't like to make excuses for the lack of wins, the Pioneers – who haven't played finals since 2003 – are faced with a number of off-field challenges.

Continued – Page 32

COMPARING THE TAC CUP COUNTRY CLUBS SINCE 2006

BENDIGO PIONEERS

RECORD: 17-70
FINISHING POSITIONS: 12th, 10th, 11th, 12th.

PLAYERS DRAFTED: 11.

2006: NATIONAL – Joel Selwood (Geelong, No. 7), Daniel Connors (Richmond, 58), Andrew Collins (Richmond, 73). **ROOKIE** – Jarryn Geary (St Kilda, 58).

2007: NATIONAL – Robbie Tarrant (North Melbourne, 15), Scott Selwood (West Coast, 22), Toby Thoolen (Collingwood, 47), Eljay Connors (St Kilda, 70). **ROOKIE** – None.

2008: NATIONAL – None. **ROOKIE** – Rhys Healey (Melbourne, 17).
2009: NATIONAL – Dustin Martin (Richmond, 3), Jordan Williams (Hawthorn, 57). **ROOKIE** – None.



JOEL SELWOOD

GEELONG FALCONS

RECORD: 65-28
FINISHING POSITIONS: 8th, 5th, 3rd, 6th.

PLAYERS DRAFTED: 28.

2006: NATIONAL – Travis Boak (Port Adelaide, 5), Daniel O'Keefe (Sydney, 15), Will Schofield (West Coast, 50), Simon Hogan (Geelong, 57), Ryan Williams (Port Adelaide, 83). **ROOKIE** – Peter Hardy (Port Adelaide, 49).

2007: NATIONAL – Lachlan Henderson (Brisbane, 8), Patrick Dangerfield (Adelaide, 10), Jack Steven (St Kilda, 42), Adam Donohue (Geelong, 60), Jaxson Barham (Collingwood, 61), Guy O'Keefe (Western Bulldogs, 63). **ROOKIE** – Ed Curnow (Adelaide, 40), Chris Kangars (Geelong, 46).

2008: NATIONAL – Ayce Cordy (Western Bulldogs, 14), Luke Rounds (Collingwood, 46), Jordan Jones (West Coast, 52), Ben Bucovaz (Fremantle, 56). **ROOKIE** – Jordie McKenzie (Melbourne, 1), Luke Delaney (North Melbourne, 25), Tom Simpkin (St Kilda, 29).

2009: NATIONAL – Ben Cunnington (North Melbourne, 5), Gary Rohan (Geelong, 6), Jasper Pittard (Port Adelaide, 16), Callum Bartlett (Brisbane, 27), Allen Christensen (Geelong, 40). **ROOKIE** – Luke Thompson (Adelaide, 17), Joe Dare (Carlton, 31).

GIPPSLAND POWER

RECORD: 57-38
FINISHING POSITIONS: 5th, 3rd, 5th, 3rd.

PLAYERS DRAFTED: 16.

2006: NATIONAL – Lachlan Hansen (North Melbourne, 3), Tyson Goldsack (Collingwood, 63). **ROOKIE** – Ben Hughes (North Melbourne, 19), Ben Mcaffer (Collingwood, 26), Robert Eddy (St Kilda, 39).

2007: NATIONAL – Dan McKenna (Geelong, 50). **ROOKIE** – Brent Connelly (Fremantle, 6).
2008: NATIONAL – Nicholas Heyne (St Kilda, 48), Campbell Heath (Sydney, 61). **ROOKIE** – Tristan Francis (Collingwood, 11), Jarryd Blair (Collingwood, 27).

2009: NATIONAL – John Butcher (Port Adelaide, 8), Koby Stevens (West Coast, 23), Nathan Vardy (Geelong, 42). **ROOKIE** – Mitchell Golby (Brisbane, 16), Jack Weston (Geelong, 21).



TYSON GOLDSACK

MURRAY BUSHRANGERS

RECORD: 55-37-1
FINISHING POSITIONS: 2nd, 1st, 10th, 9th.

PLAYERS DRAFTED: 18.

2006: NATIONAL – Ben Reid (Collingwood, 8). **ROOKIE** – Jarrod Harbrow (Western Bulldogs, 27).

2007: NATIONAL – Ben McEvoy (St Kilda, 9), Dawson Simpson (Geelong, 34). **ROOKIE** – Daniel Boyle (Port Adelaide, 31), Dean Terlich (Sydney, 61).

2008: NATIONAL – Jack Ziebell (North Melbourne, 9), Steele Sidebottom (Collingwood, 11), Sam Wright (North Melbourne, 27), Caleb Tiller (Carlton, 80). **ROOKIE** – Jamason Daniels (Western Bulldogs, 14), Riley Milne (Hawthorn, 16), Andrew Browne (Richmond, 39), Kade Klemke (Essendon, 50).

2009: NATIONAL – Sam Reid (Sydney, 38), Brayden Norris (North Melbourne, 53), Taylor Duryea (Hawthorn, 69). **ROOKIE** – Dylan McNeil (Sydney, 75).



JACK ZIEBELL

NORTH BALLARAT REBELS

RECORD: 53-41-1
FINISHING POSITIONS: 4th, 6th, 7th, 5th.

PLAYERS DRAFTED: 18.

2006: NATIONAL – Nathan Brown (Collingwood, 10), James Frawley (Melbourne, 12), Mitchell Brown (West Coast, 16), Shaun Grigg (Carlton, 19), Tim Houlihan (West Coast, 43), Matt Tyler (Brisbane, 54). **ROOKIE** – None.

2007: NATIONAL – Clayton Hinkley (Fremantle, 24), Kyle Cheney (Melbourne, 53), Matt Austin (Brisbane, 56). **ROOKIE** – None.
2008: NATIONAL – Nic Suban (Fremantle, 24), Jordan Roughead (Western Bulldogs, 31), Tim Ruffles (Fremantle, 68), Will Young (Adelaide, 72). **ROOKIE** – Bryn Weadon (Geelong, 31).

2009: NATIONAL – David Astbury (Richmond, 35), Matthew Dea (Richmond, 44), Josh Cowan (Geelong, 56). **ROOKIE** – Andrew Hooper (Western Bulldogs, 35).



SHAUN GRIGG