

Sprint Training for Australian Rules Football

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[– Are You Neglecting One Of Footy’s Most Important Skills Without Even Knowing It?](#)

SUMMARY: What do Brownlow Medalists Ben Cousins, Shane Woewodin and Simon Black all have in common? Answer - They all went to AFL Sprint Guru Mark Neates as juniors, that's what. Sprint training in Australian rules football has proven to have a massive effect on a players performance. Yet it is one of the most neglected elements of our game at the grassroots level. Which is why we spoke to Mark Neates (former Sprint Coach with West Coast Eagles and current coach with the Fremantle Dockers) to get his advice on what we should all be doing to take our players to the next level. And we were pleasantly surprised at what he had to say.

Background

There is a legendary story involving former West Coast Brownlow medalist Ben Cousins. Ben was a promising junior at the time and reknowned for his amazing work ethic, leaving no stone unturned to get the best out of himself to make it to the AFL.

So when, at the age of 16, an AFL scout told him he was a yard too slow to make the AFL, what did he do? Well, he did what a number of other AFL champions have since done as juniors in that same position – he sought the assistance of one of the AFL’s finest sprint coaches – Mark Neates.

Mark was actually the West Coast Eagle’s sprint coach at the time, and took Ben under his wing for two summers in the lead up to the 1995 AFL draft. And as a result of the work he did with this future Brownlow Medalist, Ben was able to lose the “slow” tag and eventually got drafted by West Coast.

Cousins later reported in an interview, that “the single best thing I did for my football career was to engage Mark Neates to help improve my speed development.”

As Simon Black – Brisbane Lions star and a former teammate of Ben’s at the Bullcreek Leeming Junior Football Club – explained in a recent interview:



AFL Sprint Coach Mark Neates at the West Coast Eagles, pictured here with Matt Connell, Brendan Krummel, Mitchell White (on bench) and Paul Symonds.

“Ben did a lot of speed work with Mark Neates... As a result of that, myself and a lot of other guys, the Carr boys (Josh and Matthew), (Shane) Woewodin and Chad Fletcher started going to Mark Neates and doing sprint training. We copied Ben.”

That’s three Brownlow Medalists as past clients! And aside from these players, you can also add West Coast’s Dean Cox, Chad Fletcher and Jamie McNamara, Geelong’s Harry Taylor, Essendon’s Cale Hooker, Fremantle’s Garrick Ibbotson and Adelaide’s Jon Griffin to the list of Mark’s other former clients now playing in the AFL (Mark has actually lost count).

These players all went to Mark as juniors and all benefited immensely from his knowledge and training.

This amazing track record of success, along with his time as sprint coach with the West Coast Eagles (1987 to 2000) and Fremantle Dockers (2008) has not only made Mark one of the AFL’s best and most successful sprint coaches, but also one of the most sought after as well. This year alone, Mark has been approached by East Fremantle, Claremont, Swan Districts and Subiaco to conduct sprint and fitness training, (that’s half the WAFL). Richmond even called him last year to provide some specialist sprint work for a draft prospect.

So what exactly does Mark do when he weaves his magic with footy players and what does he recommend to help coaches at the grassroots level? Well we were lucky enough to speak with Mark this month and discovered the answers to these questions and more.

The Role Of A Sprint Coach

Mark explained to us that there are a number of young kids out there who dominate at the junior level, but who never get drafted into the AFL because of a perceived lack pace. And the tragedy of it all is that their problems could be overcome in most cases if they simply undertook a properly designed sprint training program (as 3 Brownlow Medalists and former clients will tell you).

Which is why aspiring young juniors and AFL clubs seek out his services.

So what exactly does Mark do when a player comes to him for help? Well according to Mark, 9 out of 10 players go to him because “they lack take off speed over the first 10 meters, which is vitally important in football because a big percentage of our game involves sprinting over the first 10-15 metre mark.”

So when a player goes to Mark for help, the first thing he does is simply “observe” them sprinting and identify their deficiencies. And the two main problems that Mark usually finds is 1) a lack of brute strength in the legs and core, 2) poor technique, or 3) both.

Mark is also quick to add that in some cases, a player's poor speed is also sometimes due to poor flexibility. As Mark explains, "A player suffering from a lack of flexibility often takes up to 2 strides extra over 30 metres than say, your Chris Judd types, and be up to 4 metres slower over this distance. And this can kill you in football."

Once Mark identifies a player's deficiencies, he then develops a corrective program to rectify them. This often consists of a combination of strength and power drills, technical work, speed drills and mobility drills.

"Each client is different", says Mark. "Some players will make marked improvements in just 6 sessions, others could take 106 sessions. But in general, most players see significant results in just 12 weeks (training 2 sessions a week)."

Tips For Grassroot Coaches

So what does Mark recommend for coaches at the grassroots and community levels then? Well we were just as curious as you are, which is exactly why we asked him – and here's what he had to offer.

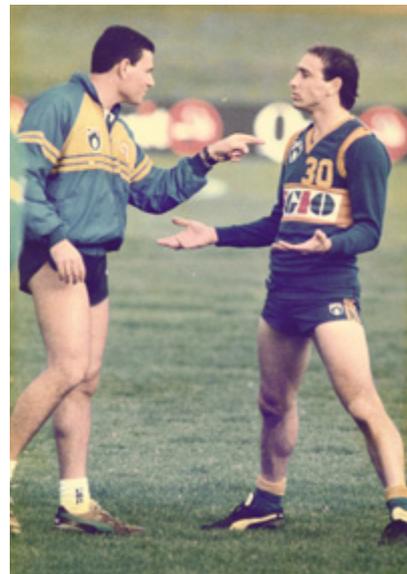
Tip # 1 – Expose Players to Spring Training

To start with, Mark simply recommends exposing players to sprint coaching in the first place.

"Most sports like hockey, soccer and football don't expose their players to a lot (if any) type of running training. Yet running is a massive part of their game. And unless a young kid goes to little athletics, he probably will not be exposed to any sort of running training at all during his football life."

Which is a tragedy, because as Mark explains, "Sprint training is a part of footy that hasn't yet been exploited in Australia, whereas in countries like the US it has and they have seen massive success with it in their sports?"

For coaches of junior and amateur level senior teams, Mark recommends dedicating around 10-15 minutes to sprint work during each training session. This should be done after the warm up and before the main skill session to ensure players are not fatigued. As Mark explains, "Unlike other elements of our game, players only benefit from sprint training when they are



Mark with Eagles great Peter Matera. According to Mark, "Matera possessed blistering pace, aided by his long stride and incredible balance and poise. These strengths allowed him to repeatedly carry the ball even in wet and muddy conditions, making him a great all round player."

able to work at maximum capacity, which is why you should do it at the beginning of a session and not the end.”

Mark also emphasizes that sprint training must be specific for it to be effective. “Doing 5 kilometer runs will only increase a players ability to run 5 kilometers – not improve their take off speed.”

As a side note, Mark revealed what AFL clubs generally do for sprint training.

According to Mark, clubs will generally run a dedicated sprint training session twice a week during pre-Christmas, then reduce it to two sessions a week post Christmas. These sessions will vary in length, but will generally last around an hour.

During the in-season, clubs will then shorten their sessions to just one “microsession” a week, lasting around 20-30 minutes. This session is normally done at least 72 hours after a game to allow players to recover at the neurological and soft tissue level, and to prevent risk of injury.

Tip # 2 – Leg and Core Strength Must be Given Priority Over Upper Body Strength

The next thing Mark recommends is to focus on your players’ leg and core strength. According to Mark, “a lot of perceived upper body strength in football actually comes from the legs and the core.”

“In a one-on-one marking contest for example, people don’t realize that so called upper body strength actually starts at the legs first, then transfers through to the core, before finally allowing the upper body to become involved. So a player’s upper body strength is really driven from a strong base and core. Without it, upper body strength becomes irrelevant.”

In fact, Mark pointed out that developing leg and core strength not only improves a player’s speed, it also helps improve jumping, kicking distance, scrummaging, tackling, change of direction and a player’s ability to get off the ground (something that Dr Les Fabre also highlighted to us in a previous article on [core stability training](#)).

Tip # 3 – Work On Flexibility

Finally, Mark also recommended that coaches don’t overlook the importance of flexibility in their training.

According to Mark, “If players aren’t supple, they can’t develop a good stride length. And stride length is responsible for at least 50% of a player’s speed, so it doesn’t matter how good a player is, because no stride length means no speed.”

And like Mark said before, “A player suffering from a lack of flexibility often takes up to 2strides extra over 30 metres than say, your Chris Judd types,

and be upto 4 metres slower over this distance. And this can kill you in football.”

Final Thoughts

Speed over the first 10-15 meters is a big percentage of our game and AFL clubs have realized this fact, proofed by the amount of emphasis they are placing on it at training and in their drafting strategy.

Sadly however, it is also an area that is often neglected by coaches at the community and grassroots levels. If you are one of those coaches, then look at the bright side. You now have an opportunity to add it to your training arsenal and possibly get the competitive advantage you've been looking for.

And if like a young Ben Cousins, Simon Black or Shane Woewodin, you have a young player that is perhaps being held back by a lack of pace, consider directing him to a professional sprint coach like Mark Neates.