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May 5 2018 - 11:30AM

A-League grand final 2018: The history of the Newcastle Jets

- NEIL JAMESON

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NEWCASTLE JETS: From coal to the fields of our dreams

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How do you explain a miracle?

Accounting for the freakish alignment of the planets that has landed Newcastle a home-town grand final has defied star-gazers and football pundits alike.

Not that it has stopped us trying.

All over town we've gathered in excited clumps to offer theories on how Ernie Merrick's mob have pulled off the outhouse-to-penthouse marvel. Now, as the Jets hover on the cusp of A-League history, let's take another shot at explaining the inexplicable.

Bear with us as we go w-a-y back - back to our region's first coal boom.

The 1880s brought young Brits in their droves to mine the seams around here.

They came burning with the football fever that had transfixed a generation in their homelands. In so doing, they established Newcastle and the Coalfields as the cradle of the game in Australia and built clubs that pre-date most others around the football world.

Among those migrant miners were plenty of Scots carving out the bedrock of Newcastle's football heritage.

PhD's have been won hypothesizing why the bravehearts are so damn brilliant at football management. Jock Stein (Celtic), Bill Shankly and Kenny Dalglish (Liverpool), and Alex Ferguson (Manchester United) built dynasties.

And now we have two Jocks at the controls of the Jets - Lawrie McKinna in the chief executive seat and Ernie Merrick piloting the football project.

- **READ MORE:** [Everything you need to know about the grand final](#)

Footballer, coach, mayor of Gosford and now boss of the Jets doubling as youth team coach, McKinna combines the bonhomie of a populist politician with an instinct for weaving the myriad threads that constitute club and community into a winning pattern. In his time on the Central Coast he made the cash-starved Mariners ultra competitive.

At Gosford he coached a young Newcastle-born defender overlooked by his hometown club.

Cursed by a run of injury, Nigel Boogaard would have been cut loose by most coaches. McKinna stuck by him.

Just how, a dozen years later, Boogaard finally made it back home to captain Newcastle is a redemptive miracle in itself.

Last week, the skipper returned from the trauma of a fractured tibia to lead the Jets into the finals. The centre-back's toughness, strategic guile and fierce passion are essential to the 2017-18 success.

His place in this narrative hints at Newcastle's deep football heritage.

Dad Michael and Brett Cowburn, graduated from the white-hot incubator of northern Lake Macquarie in the 1970s to play for Newcastle. A generation later, it's rousing to see their sons Nigel and Nick Cowburn on the team-sheet.

Understanding the magic that Ernie Merrick has worked in Newcastle requires an appreciation of the A-League coaching environment.

With so few jobs and no safety net, coaches live in a state of perpetual anxiety. "Rent, don't buy" is the byword in this risky line of work. The sight of stress-ridden coach, cussing and blinding on match-day, is an A-League cliché. That unrelenting strain seeps its way through training ground and dressing room, fostering tension and fear.

In Ernie Merrick we have the antithesis.

Witness his reaction to Riley McGree's stupendous goal last week: while the bench and every bay around McDonald Jones Stadium erupted, Merrick remained the calm at the eye of the storm.

Through three decades, that started with impoverished lower league clubs and yielded championships and two A-League coach of the year awards with Melbourne Victory, Ernie's done and won it all to an extent that, at 65, he's seemingly impervious to the strain.

Merrick's quiet voice and comedic insight has gone down well in this town with its low tolerance of big heads.

Addressing a gathering of ex-players he was asked about his own playing career and had them gasping with laughter with the tale of how he had checked the team selection sheets to note that he hadn't been picked in the firsts, nor the seconds or the thirds. He stormed up to the boss to ask why he had been consigned to the fourth grade. "Because we don't have a bloody fifth!" was the answer.

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It's standard practice for coaches to impose a clean-out when taking over a wooden-spoon outfit. Merrick did the opposite.

Instead of showing his struggling charges the door and damning the team-building efforts of predecessors Scott Miller and Mark Jones, he expressed faith and support while looking to strengthen the ranks with just a few key signings.

Merrick has restored fun and freedom to the Jets. But first he set the boundaries.

Insiders say he didn't mix his words when laying out a blueprint that demanded a non-negotiable work ethic from each and every individual. There would be no short-cuts. "Relentless" was the word used by football operations manager Joel Griffiths.

Merrick's front-foot, attacking brand of football has licensed players to take risks (within reason) and, in so doing, re-connected them to the joy and ambition of their youth.

Under Merrick and his assistant, home-grown former Socceroo Clayton Zane, the game has become fun again and Newcastle the most entertaining side in the A-League. It's a happy workplace.

No two players better illustrate the process than Ben Kantarovski and Jason Hoffman.

Down on confidence from the 2016-17 train wreck, they must have pondered their chances under a new coach. They need not have worried. This season they re-discovered their mojo.

Kanta reprised the swagger that once made the midfielder a target of Bayern Munich.

In a stroke of pure genius, Merrick returned fullback Hoffman to the sort of offensive role he had enjoyed in his youth. Admittedly, there was a mis-step of two. When Hoffman momentarily forgot the coach's attacking edict and shaped to back-pass. Merrick rose from his seat to signal: "Do that again, Hoff, and you'll be off!"

The data collected from tracking devices shows that few cover more kilometres in a match than the Hoff, and nobody makes more forward runs. He's now a goal-scoring weapon whose strike against Melbourne City shot the Jets into the grand final.

Fresh talent has enriched the mix.

Kiwi international goalkeeper Glen Moss has been a rock-solid replacement. Midfielder Riley McCree, at 19 and on loan from Club Brugge, scorpion kick aside, has been a revelation.

Venezuelan Ronny Vargas is the x-factor, an on-ball wizard capable of turning a game with a couple of deft touches. Merrick credits the persistence of Joel Griffiths and McKinna in landing their signatures.

The Vargas signing would prove instructive for different reasons.

When a fractured ankle added the game-breaking marquee to a growing early-season injury list, the Jets were expected to buckle.

Instead, the crisis revealed a steely resilience. Their season-defining moment arrived on March 3 when, with playing depth stretched to the limit and reduced to 10 men, they beat league leaders Sydney FC 2-1.

ON BOARD: Newcastle Jets owner Martin Lee has brought financial clout to the club.

In realising its destiny as a potential football powerhouse, Newcastle has long had most of its ducks in a row: loyal supporters, suitable ground, motivated players and coaching staff. The constant omission has been the most vital ingredient of all: capitalisation. We've had the ducks, but not the bucks.

Enter Ledman boss Martin Lee.

An investor in China's nationwide push to become a world football power, the Shenzhen electronics magnate had noted how Australia, with a population of 25 million, had managed to win the Asian Cup, and Western Sydney Wanderers, on a fraction of the budget of China's Super League clubs, had won the Asian Club Championship. Martin Lee reasoned he would get a better bang for his yuan in Australia.

With their new-found viability, instead of being the transfer market's option of last resort, Newcastle has jumped to near top of the queue.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of Newcastle KB United's national league debut and 10 years since the Jets 2008 grand final victory over the Central Coast Mariners.

For players from the past four decades, it's a big reunion night at the stadium. Each of them and the fans have a massive stake in this long-awaited miracle.

For the new Newcastle, transitioning so impressively from its industrial past to whatever happens next, this event is a gauge of where we've been and where we're headed.

Tonight, let's be the best of competitors and the most gracious of hosts. Extend the hand of friendship to our Melbourne visitors.

We want them - and all our future grand final guests - to experience what is so damn special about this place - this city of miracles.

Neil Jameson is a former Newcastle Herald journalist and a co-founder of KB United

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