

Football

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Back in Tiger fold, Bartlett regrets exile

JAKE NIAL

RICHMOND legend Kevin Bartlett has expressed regret that he remained estranged from the club for "too long" while revealing the rationale behind his 16-year self-imposed exile from Punt Road.

In his book, *KB: A Life in Football*, Bartlett admits that he should have returned to Richmond when he was made an "Immortal" in 2000, when he sent his son Rhett to receive the award on his behalf. He calls this snub "a wrong decision".

Bartlett's exile was a protest that followed his sacking as coach at the end of the 1991 season after four years in the job.

"Looking back, my stance went on for too long. I think I made my point that I was disappointed with the way the club had acted," Bartlett wrote in his book, which is to be released on August 2 and covers his 403 games and five premierships as a Richmond champion, his contentious sacking as coach and exile and his influential role on the AFL's laws of the game committee.

"My son represented me on the Immortal night but looking back I should have been there on the night to accept the accolade."

Bartlett wrote that he was "very thrilled" to be a Richmond immortal in 2000.

"In looking back, I was too stubborn and I should have been there on the night, because the club had bestowed on me their highest individual honour," he said. "Instead I sent my son on my behalf. At the time it was a comfortable decision for me. But in hindsight it was a poor decision and a wrong decision."

Bartlett said he stayed away because of the way he had been treated when he was sacked and that he also wanted to "send a message to that board — or any board".

"I came to the conclusion that the club didn't have any real respect for its people. If

they sacked me without the least opportunity to meet to discuss where the club was at and what its strengths and weaknesses were after my four years as coach, then the ethos of the club had fundamentally changed and I no longer wanted to be part of it.

"It was a silent protest. I wanted to show the club that it could no longer treat people as it had done and that if it wanted to dispense of its

I wasn't bitter. Some say I was, but there was no bitterness.

KEVIN BARTLETT

coaches in the future in a similar fashion, there might be consequences."

In the book, which was co-authored with son Rhett, who has written extensively about Richmond's history, Bartlett also reveals:

■ That during his exile he was approached on multiple occasions to either run for the board or be part of an attempt to "oust" an administration.

■ That famed club "Godfather," the late Graeme Richmond, had asked media to undermine Bartlett when he was coach and had encouraged people to go down to the rooms and agitate for his removal.

■ That, from his vantage point on the rules committee, the high mark is dead. "I am really passionate in my belief that the high mark will never return as a permanent highlight in our game. It is dead. The players are so skilful, the

Tiger legend: Bartlett played 403 games for Richmond.

keepings off nature of the game so ingrained."

■ That he decided to return to Punt Road after a 2006 reunion of premiership players in which he spoke to Neville Crowe, the president who sacked him, and realised it was time to end his protest.

"My wife Denise, was also in my ear, telling me it was time to let go. I had made my point and it was time to move on."

Bartlett said during his exile, "I was approached to try and oust somebody, I was approached to join a group to challenge the board and was approached to support people running for the board. I may have stayed away for too long and I put my hand up for that because I can be stubborn at times."

"During that time, I made an absolute priority of never getting involved in the politics of the club and never criticising anyone individually ... even though I was away 16 years, I wasn't bitter. Some people say I was, but there was no bitterness."

Bartlett said many fans didn't understand the game's rules. "... I don't think many football supporters understand the laws of the game. They certainly don't appreciate how hard it is to umpire."

Bartlett said after he was sacked as coach, a journalist who was close to Graeme Richmond told him "Graeme had called a number of media friends to a lunch and put it on them to make life difficult for me. This journalist even went as far to say that Graeme deliberately sent people down to the dressing rooms after the game to be abusive towards the players and me, in an effort to create unrest."

KB: A Life in Football is available at footybookclub.com



a boy goes into a shop and ultimately regrets buying a cheap pair of shoes. "Pay the price, pay the price ..."

Jean was more than a football person. Growing up in Tocumwal on the Murray in a broken family, he left school at 14 and worked as a labourer, a bricklayer and a barman to help support his mother. He and his wife, Mary, whom he met in Melbourne and married in 1958, had four children and 10 grandchildren.

After football he became a fine lawn bowler, winning Cheltenham club's singles championship in 1999-2000 season in just his fifth year of playing. The club's Robert Williamson, a close friend who also paid a tribute yesterday, coached him for a time. "Everything I told him was questioned and analysed, so that it was not long before

he was making suggestions as to how I could improve my coaching methods."

In his final months, Jean mapped out his own funeral with help from his old mate, former Victoria Police commissioner Mick Miller. A meticulous planner, Jean even scratched out the printed guide for his memorial service.

He showed it to former St Kilda premiership rover Ross Smith a few weeks ago, proud as punch. "After reading the draft, I got his full attention when I suggested there was one key piece missing, something that had been overlooked," Smith related yesterday. "Jeansy, I said, 'You haven't included a date'. Sadly, that date has now been included."

About 2000 people attended the service. The cortege passed onto the

hallowed ground through a guard of honour formed by his past players, so Ditterich and Smith and Morrow and Murray would mingle with Dunstall and Brereton and Platten and Ayres. The songs of all three of his clubs were played by the police band.

"Allan coached at a time when there was little or no technology to assist coaches," said Smith. "No GPS to monitor a player's workload, no DVDs to hand out to players post-game, no statistics online and in real time. On game day, he could not turn to a forward coach, a backline coach, a fitness adviser to get advice."

"He had to rely on what he'd seen, what he believed was necessary, and at the time he had to act. He was coach, counsellor, psychologist, conditioner and manager, all in one."

found redemption and helped spread the word

now, but in 2003 there was a real party atmosphere on tour and we had good reason to celebrate, accounting for the Irish comfortably. Some bonding needed to be done, and Hall does bonding better than most.

On the final night of the tour in Melbourne, we were "bonding" into the wee hours, and every so often Hall would lean into my ear, wearing that broad grin of his, and in the deepest of whispers say, "I'm gonna shave your head tonight".

I had, regrettably, long hair at the time (I wanted it to look like Roger Daltrey's, but really it was more like

Brian May's). As silly as my hair was, I was pretty keen to hang onto it and the prospect of being held down against my will by the hulking Swan had me in a sweat. The impromptu haircut never did eventuate, but the fear lingered.

Being the pup on that tour, I fell under Hall's St Nicholas spell, and as I got to know him I often caught myself thinking that he wasn't the person I'd expected. He had the brutal reputation, he had the imposing physique, and don't discount the deepest of deep voices as the perfect way to round out the stereotype.

But after spending a bit more time in his presence it was clearly evident that he was a kind and gentle soul.

Apart from playing against him occasionally, the next time I saw Hall was on *Before The Game*. We had just been bundled out of the finals for the second year in a row, and the calls were coming that the ingredient we needed to go all the way was a key forward.

The "Bad" by now had been reinstated to his alias, and he seemed a different, distant version to the one I'd encountered five years earlier. His time at Sydney had taken him to the top of the top, but

his departure was, in his own words, "the lowest point". He was a broken footballer, and at that point maybe even a broken man.

He found redemption at Footscray. Hallelujah!

The club has had a mixed bag with high-profile recruits, but "Baz" fits into a footy club like an old man fits into his slippers. He deliberately came to us with the minimum of fuss — coach Rodney Eade called him "old school" this week, in that he wanted to earn his stripes and not rest on his reputation.

I was intrigued to watch him mix with our group over that first pre-season, and

conversely watch as our players warmed to him instantly as the real man emerged. Two seasons he's been here, but it feels like a whole lot more. He's a much-loved player around the club.

To see Baz play the game up close has been to witness football's true joy. The man with the innate ability to draw young people towards him has played with the spirit of the child within. The simple joy of chasing a ball and kicking it with your mates has produced some stunning football from him.

He never did get around to shaving my head, and thankfully he's moved on. In fact,

he's moved onto stealing teammates' cars (mine included) and hiding them around the club. Jarrad Grant found his in the boxing gym. I found mine in the Whitten Oval goal square last year, and it took me the best part of an hour to navigate a safe exit. Managing to make car theft in Footscray cool again is a fair effort.

It's been a massive career for the man who started out a Saint. His halo shone brightly for the most part and dimmed a couple of times, but he's a premiership captain and a man who will be long remembered as a Bulldog hero.