

ROOM

WITH **KAREN HARDY**
AND **CADEN HELMERS**
karen.hardy@canberratimes.com.au
caden.helmers@canberratimes.com.au

Is this Canberra's greatest player ever?

BELCONNEN Magpies president **Scott Reid** beats you to the punch with the first question: "did you read it?"

He's talking about the numbers you'd find on the back of **James Bennett's** trading card.

Three premierships, two Mulrooney Medals as AFL Canberra's best and fairest, an **Alex Jesaulenko** Medal winner as best on ground in a grand final, and 332 first grade games across the AFL Canberra and SANFL competitions.

Then you throw in nine Belconnen best and fairest awards - and another at SANFL club North Adelaide - and you start to wonder where the retiring midfielder ranks among the greatest AFL Canberra has ever seen.

"It's pretty incredible. I don't think that would be easily matched by anyone in AFL Canberra," Reid said.

"Given the fact he had that stint over in Adelaide as well and picked up a best and fairest over there, it's pretty impressive.

"One of the biggest things for us was the fact he loved the club so much, given the heritage his father and brother had at the club. Over 1000 games between them, it's pretty incredible.

"Especially when we went through the NEAFL era, knocking back offers from all over NSW and beyond, for him to stay at Belconnen, absolutely incredible."

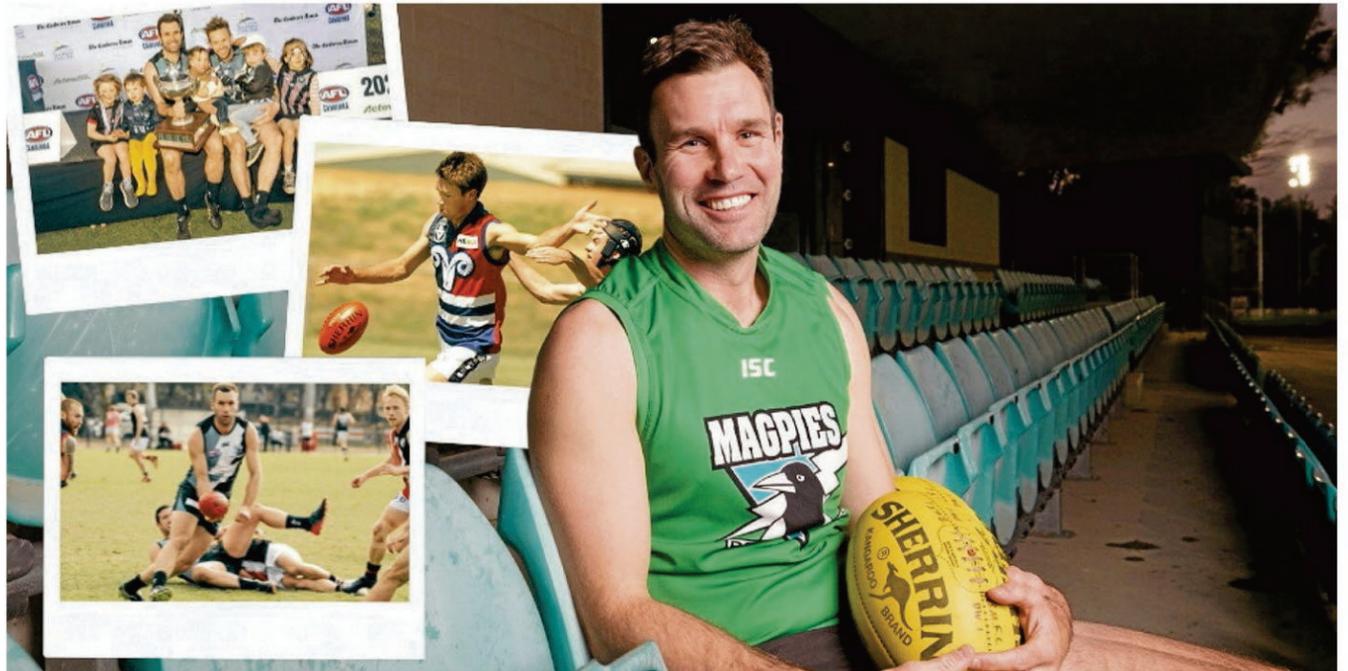
All that and a way to make his teammates "want to run through brick walls".

Bennett's stellar first grade career started as a 16-year-old in 2004 and ended in an elimination final loss to the Eastlake Demons on Sunday.

"It's been a great ride. It probably won't really sink in that I'm not playing until March or April rolls around next year," Bennett said.

"There's lots of things that I won't miss, but I think that competitive part of the game, playing with your mates, when someone kicks a goal and you get around them, those moments that get the blood flowing will be the things that I miss the most."

But Bennett and wife **Sophie** won't exactly



James Bennett will hang up the boots after a stellar career in Belconnen. Pictures by Elesa Kurtz, Gary Ramage, Sitthixay Dittavong

have their Saturdays back for long.

"There's about three weeks now before Little Athletics starts and there goes all the Saturdays in summer," Bennett grinned.

Reid reckons it's one thing to have footballing ability. It's another to leave such a mark on so many people's lives.

"Canberra footy is better for it. Belconnen footy club has now created an environment for success, but also to be good people and make good choices," Reid said.

"We're in a good place because we've got good people, and a lot of that is thanks to James Bennett."

Now more of Bennett's time revolves around six-year-old Poppy, four-year-old Darcy and five-month-old Vivienne.

"They're so sad that I'm not playing anymore. They just love getting lollies from the team manager and being around all the other players and having a kick," Bennett said.

"That's been a really nice thing to have for

the past few years while I've got some young kids, how much enjoyment they got out of it too.

"It's been a huge part of my family and the relationship I have with my mum, my dad and my brother.

"I feel pretty content when I start to talk about the end. You start to talk about your family and your friends, that's when the emotions start to come up and hit you pretty hard. I tried to keep it together but it got the better of me a few times."

BATTLE LINES DRAWN

Sam Williams reckons Queanbeyan trainer **Frank Cleary** might be as proud a Blues man as you'd ever come across, but you'll still find him knocking back a schooner at the Roos Club.

"So if there's a line drawn, Frank has crossed it," Queanbeyan Kangaroos player-coach Williams said.

If battle lines have been drawn ahead of

the Canberra Raiders Cup grand final at Seiffert Oval on Sunday, there might be a few flouting them.

"The mayor, **Kenrick Winchester**, he's another one," Williams said.

"He's definitely getting himself a bit confused at times about what team he supports, because I think he's telling me one thing and 'Brauny' [Queanbeyan Blues coach **Jeremy Braun**] another thing.

"Everyone in town has got their side, you're either a Roos person or a Blues person. That's great for the town, I enjoy the banter with it all, I enjoy what comes with the derby."

Last week you would have found Winchester wearing a Bungendore jersey as the Tigers surged to a drought-breaking George Tooke Shield win.

Soon enough, Raiders coach **Ricky Stuart** walks by and taps on the window.

"He's another Blues bloke too," Williams said. "He's on the other side of the fence."

What goes on tour: Original Wallaroo 'always up to mischief' tells all

THEY say what goes on tour stays on tour, so we're interested to read *Wallaroo 19*, by **Libby Andrew**.

Our own **Karen Hardy** was a teammate of Andrew's back in the day, part of a premiership-winning Royals team and the pair headed off to the first ever Australian Women's Rugby Championships in Newcastle back in 1993.

Andrew was clearly the more talented of the two. She went on to be selected for Australia and played in the first international women's Test Match, against New Zealand. On the 30th anniversary of this milestone, Andrew has reflected on her own journey, sharing the history of the women's game in Australia and beyond in this interesting book.

Apparently there are plenty of good yarns, even from that inaugural tour, so Karen tells us. "Libby was always up to mischief, so I'm keen to see what's in the book." The book is available to order for \$19.95 via <https://www.libbyandrew.com.au/>

NEW CLUBHOUSE OPENS

A proud day for the Canberra Netball Association, with the new clubhouse at the Lyneham courts now officially open. Not only is there a great canteen (read more about that soon), but there's an undercover barbecue area, more accessible and improved amenities, a community hub, first aid room, board room and competition office.

CNA president **Gillian Shaw** said the new

clubhouse was a real community effort, with the fundraising within the association matching \$475,000 in government grants.

"I'm very proud that for every dollar we were able to receive through grants we were able to match that with fundraising efforts from our netball community," Shaw said.

A feature of the new building is the First Nations artwork which adorns the Northbourne Avenue facing side of the building, created by Wiradjuri artist, **Kalara Gilbert**.

HAVE YOUR SAY

- Have you heard something and want to get in touch?
- caden.helmers@canberratimes.com.au



Original Wallaroo Libby Andrew will publish a book about her career.