

PROCREATION THEORY: THE PANIC BEHIND CHINA'S THREE-CHILD POLICY

# Good Weekend

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## MARKED MEN

Umpiring in an era of abuse

BY *Konrad Marshall*

*AFL umpire Matt Stevic*



Matt Stevic started field umpiring local AFL games at age 13: "You look back and think, 'What young kid with a reasonable mind would want to get out there and risk being physically manhandled by an adult?'"

# R.E.S.P.E.C.T

People rarely talked about umpires in sport – until the abuse started ratcheting up. Now they're the story, as the AFL and other codes grapple with how best to protect not only those governing the game – but the game itself.

STORY BY *Konrad Marshall* PHOTOGRAPH BY *Tony McDonough*

THE RAIN is pelting down in Melbourne and round five of the AFL season has ended, meaning it's time for footy's *punditbureau* to lean into their confected weekly lists of likes and dislikes from the playing field. "Top of the agenda," intones veteran broadcaster Gerard Whateley, "is the public inferno that rages around the umpire-respect debate."

He's referring to the new umpire-abuse crackdown, in which players are penalised not just for mouthing off, but for formerly innocuous actions now deemed too disrespectful (pointing out an umpiring mistake on the big screen) or overly demonstrative (holding your arms up in disbelief). Six players were pinged this weekend for little more than nonplussed body language, and the commentator class is apoplectic, gruffly huffing over the AFL's new zero-tolerance policy.

Funereal columnists worry the shift will "tear at the fabric of footy", mourning a game that has clearly "jumped the shark", while analyst-for-hire David King sees only "complete smartarsery from the atom-splitter at the AFL". New media mouthpiece Nathan Buckley is similarly unequivocal: "This is a train crash, and it's happening in slow motion."

In a way, that's just Melbourne in April. Hyperbolic hyperventilation is what Victorian sports media does best, and the AFL (and those bloody umps) make an easy target. But Brad Scott, the confrontational former player and coach – now haughty AFL general manager of football – is having none of it. Inside Marvel Stadium on a Tuesday night, while heat lamps try valiantly to stimulate grass growth in the gloom, he fronts a media scrum on the sodden oval. "I get that players may wonder, 'What's the level of dissent we're allowed to produce?' And our answer to that ... is none. You can't question an umpire's decision."

Hold up. What about when a decision is incorrect, asks *The Age* football writer Michael Gleeson, and a player reacts and is *penalised* for reacting – just suck it up? "Couldn't have said it better myself," says Scott, who – it must be said – was infamously unable to suck it up throughout his entire playing *and* coaching career.

I ask about this later, when we're lost together in the concrete rabbit warren of the stadium, trying to find our way from AFL HQ to the Quill Room, where the game's umpires have gathered for training. Opening countless doors to nowhere, like an episode of *Get Smart*, Scott stops to offer a mea culpa, but also a warning. "Every former player or coach, myself included, would look back and say, 'What I did was unacceptable,'" he says. "It was tolerated back then, and it shouldn't have been. And it won't be now."

He shares the same message with the umpiring fraternity, here for a weekly debriefing from their umpiring coaches. "We're not *encouraging* you to pay these free kicks," he says, "we're *telling* you to." The furore will fade, he predicts, just as it did over new rules against dangerous tackles or sliding into an opponent's legs. "Like any news cycle, there'll be noise for a few days or a few weeks. But it's worth it," Scott says. "If we look at the game in 10 years' time, this will be a really important moment. I have no doubt we'll be ashamed about the way we behaved towards umpires."

THE UMPIRES – three dozen all told – nod in unison. None of them is unfamiliar with abuse, including the man with the Roger Ramjet chin sitting up the back, sipping a blue Powerade. It's Matt Stevic, 42, an officiator in 433 AFL games (and counting) over 19 seasons, including nine grand finals. A star among his peers, Stevic also became the involuntary face of his profession nine months ago, for a very different reason.

It was week one of the 2021 AFL finals series, three-quarter-time in a match between the Sydney Swans and the GWS Giants in Launceston, Tasmania. The Giants box-office drawcard, forward Toby Greene – think idiot savant meets baby-faced assassin – stormed

towards his team's huddle. Making eye contact with Stevic, he pointed to where an opponent won a free kick minutes earlier, and spat his words: "He took a f...ng dive." Shaking his head, Greene approached Stevic and made no effort to steer around the umpire, instead walking through him. Stevic deftly pirouetted away from Greene, turning what would have been a bump into a nudge.

That might have been the end of it, but the physical encounter was picked up online and went viral. The court of public opinion was in session well before the game had ended, and the already unpopular Greene was tried and convicted by most of a cardinal sin – contact with an umpire – but also defended/excused by high-profile commentators Luke Darcy, Matthew Richardson and Luke Hodge. Stevic found himself caught between conflicting public outrages.

He received a pat-on-the-back text message from AFL chief executive Gillon McLachlan – "Just saw the vision. Great, calm, diffusing umpiring. Well done, Gil" – yet felt anything but calm. The season of a marquee player from an expansion team hung on the outcome of a tribunal hearing at which Stevic would testify. He understood his responsibility – he would need to represent every boy and girl umpire in the country, while remaining as impartial as he would if he were assessing a high tackle or a ruck contest. (He sometimes describes his duty in almost existential terms: "It's not our job in any scenario to make out any incident as being anything more or less than it is.")

He told the judiciary he didn't feel threatened. "But when I got asked a question about 'the look of the game,'" he adds, "I had no hesitation in saying that I didn't feel it was a good look for football." Greene was suspended for six weeks, ending his and the Giants' season. "I wasn't in the wrong, but I was caught up in this huge story," says Stevic. "I was trying to contain all these emotions and stresses and feelings. Without a shadow of a doubt, they were the most challenging days I've had in my whole career."

The moment with Greene ultimately became a catalyst for the umpire-abuse crackdown, but that shouldn't be Stevic's career claim to fame. It should be a mere footnote. Stevic is regarded by many as the GOAT (greatest of all time) among AFL umpires – an adjudicator who knows every arcane rule and can interpret every cue upon which to apply them, while coolly communicating with aggressive/adrenalised athletes, turning chaos into calm. "I go by the statistics," says retired umpire Shaun Ryan. "He's got eight All-Australians, and the next best guy has five. Stev is so far ahead. In 100 years' time we'll still be saying, 'Can you believe a guy was number one for that long?'"

Stevic grew up in the town of Leongatha, two hours south-east of Melbourne. He was an avid Olympics watcher and played cricket, basketball and, yes, footy. He won't say who he barracked for as a kid, because such information would be weaponised by fans to infer bias. "People also think we hold grudges and pay free kicks based on verbal sprays, yet if you've called me an effin' whatever, and two minutes later you get your head ripped off, I'm going to give you a free kick. Why? Because if I don't, I'll get marked down in my performance review."

He started umpiring when he was 12. (He wasn't much of a player, and \$20 for running the boundary line during a game in Poowong sounded appealing.) Then he began hitching a ride with older umpires to Drouin, training on chilly, swampy ovals in heavy, muddy boots. He tried field umpiring the next year – a kid bossing around 17-year-old farm-boy footballers. His hardest day came that year, in a game at Koo Wee Rup, when he reported a boy for striking and sent him off. Leaving the oval, Stevic was suddenly confronted – and shirt-fronted – by a grown man.

"Not to the ground, but it was forceful, with swearing. I was really, really small. Only 13. It came from nowhere and it shook me up," he says. "The umpires'



rooms at most grounds are like closets, and I remember being in tears in the rooms and thinking, 'I don't want to do this.' And you look back and think, 'What young kid with a reasonable mind would want to get out there and do that again, at the risk of being physically manhandled by an adult?'"

**T**HE BACKDROP to this story is that umpiring is in crisis. It's not hard to find recent incidents illustrating why. Take the field umpire in rural Victoria chased by a player, then jumped on, headlocked and king-hit. Look at the 46-year-old mother, charged with assaulting a 13-year-old umpire in suburban Perth. Or shake your head at the coach in Melbourne's south-east, spewing verbal abuse – a torrent worthy of sacking – during a match played by under-10s.

Despite this, umpire numbers are not plummeting but nor are they growing, and that's the problem. Participation in the sport is exploding, with about a million participants nationally (particularly through expanding leagues for women and girls), leaving Australian rules football an estimated 6000 umpires short at grassroots level. Compounding the problem: a toxic, sexist culture for female umpires, as revealed in a recent report. Only 10 per cent of umpires nationally are women. If their conditions were improved and this lopsided gender representation was addressed, it might go a long way to recruiting enough new officials.

Still, the primary reason for the overall shortfall? A lack of respect, and that's a global issue. Look at tennis player Daniil Medvedev's tantrum during the Australian Open: "Are you stupid?" he snarled at an umpire. "Look at me! I'm talking to you!" And that attack was soon made tame by Alexander Zverev following a doubles loss in the Mexico Open. "For f...s sake," Zverev railed, "f...ing idiot." After repeatedly smashing his racquet against the umpire's chair, the German multimillionaire was given a paltry \$US20,000 fine. "The message that sends to officials in all sports," says Stevic, pausing, "I found that appalling." He's continually baffled, too, by the way elite soccer players are indulged, from protesting free kicks to flopping about on the turf, feigning injury. "Why is that accepted?"

The International Federation for Sports Officials (IFSO), the organisation that monitors officials from leagues all over the world, thinks it knows the answer. Speaking from Paris, secretary general Charlotte Girard Fabre, an ice-hockey referee, shares a theory. "The more contact there is in the sport – where physical integrity is important to the players – the more respect is given," she says, "because the referee is the last line of protection." (It's commonly accepted, for instance, that rugby players show the most respect to umpires – even calling them "sir" – and soccer players the least.) Money, says Fabre, also plays a role. "If I am Neymar, and I receive €500,000 per match, and I know the referee receives €1000 per match, there is an inevitable feeling of superiority."

Patrick Vajda, IFSO president – and a former Olympic fencing referee – says there's also a new factor in play: the pandemic. People have forgotten how to be good citizens, or at least civil ones, and have stored up two years of stress while not playing or coaching or spectating. "Now they explode, and always against the same target: the referee," Vajda says. "After masks and curfews and lockdowns, it's fashionable now to act against authority."

THE UMPIRES don't seem like authority figures at training. There they seem much more like athletic teammates, and the parallels with clubland are stark. Everyone smells of liniment. There are framed photos of umpiring legends on the wall. They have nicknames, of course, from Bongo and Hosko and Stevo to Heffy and Pelly and Shags. The things they say could be said in any players' meeting, from "Great energy, great

talk" to "When we all work together and play our role, we get the good result."

"Authenticity" is the buzzword in sporting circles, and the umps have been Brené Brown acolytes for longer than the players. For years, they've begun training sessions with a vulnerability exercise in which one of them personally opens up to the group. Stevic's tale was about his mum, a single parent who supported him and his older brother with three part-time jobs. She was a nurse and aerobics instructor, and took in ironing and washing, too, including cleaning the warm-up jackets for the Leongatha Football Club. "She got \$1 a jacket," he says. "I remember they'd be hung all around our blinds at home."

After his mother was hit by a car while shopping one day, Stevic, then 15, found her in hospital moaning and bloodied, with her pelvis, knee and shoulder smashed. "I saw them cut her clothes off her. It was the most confronting thing I'd seen in my life." She stayed in hospital for nine months, while Stevic learnt to cook and clean and continued to umpire for extra income, growing up within that trauma. "Mum taught me the value of working damn hard to get everything you want – to be independent and do shit yourself. She's a warrior as a person," he says. "I want to aspire to be the best, but there's also this element of wanting to repay her, and make her proud."

"I always get asked about fitness, but that's the easy part," Stevic says. "The hard part is the hundreds and hundreds of mental transactions per game." Take the assessments he makes during just one tackle. Did he duck? Did he drop at the knees? Was there a shrug? Did he raise the arms? Or fend? Did the tackler land on top of him? Or catch him high? Was it a legal disposal? Did he have prior opportunity?

"Only a few dozen free kicks are paid per game, and you might think if we got 30 right and six wrong, that it looks bad," he says. "But what about the 750 times we *didn't* blow the whistle? Because those are decisions as well."

The umpires used to train together twice a week, but now they train mostly alone like this, partly as a hangover from the pandemic but also because they've been neglected by head office – an underfunded afterthought shunted between different facilities for years. The league has promised to do better. That would be wise. Sports psychologist Fraser Carson, a former mental skills coach for the Melbourne Demons, studied the mental health and wellbeing of sporting officials for Deakin University's Centre for Sports Research in 2020, surveying 317 officials from a range of sports. The most telling findings were comparative ones between amateurs and professionals. Anxiety, depression and stress



*Above, from left: a catalyst moment – Toby Greene (at back) bumping into Matt Stevic in 2021; Alexander Zverev's tantrum at this year's Mexican Open.*

UMPIRING IS hard work, but well-compensated, too, albeit not compared with player salaries. At 13, Stevic was earning \$120 for a senior game, and he's doing just fine now, too. AFL umpires make between \$75,000 to \$175,000 a year for a commitment of 15-25 hours a week that creeps into each day. Flush runs and sea baths after game day, an individual review on Monday, group review on Tuesday, specialised running

Wednesday, swimming or a spin session Thursday, preparation (and often travel) on Friday, then a match, then you do it all again.

Stevic used to be a high-school phys-ed teacher and now runs an investment portfolio. His peers are accountants and cafe owners, Australian Defence Force aerospace engineers and banking managers. Umpiring is a part-time job, but consumes 11 months of the year and dictates your social calendar. (Weddings, parties, everything.) As the players say, until you retire, you're not going to see the Greek Islands in the northern summer.

I watch Stevic run one Wednesday morning at Fawcner Park in South Yarra, doing 400-metre sprint efforts around an oval. Big Brother is watching, too: slipped into a pocket on the back of his shirt is a GPS tracker, monitoring a set program. He has to cover about 15 kilometres most games, but trains more for dynamic movement.

were higher in younger officials from community competitions than their older counterparts in elite sport. The message was clear: "The officials least able to cope with abuse were the ones who had the least support."

Stevic feels well-supported. He invests in his own scaffolding, too, whether paying for an extra massage each week or going to see a sports psychologist. He feels grateful, also, for professional-development opportunities abroad, like visiting with officials from the English Premier League or the big American sports – the NFL, NHL, MLB and NBA.

They could use some help from commentators. Nothing is more frustrating than watching a game and listening to an overexcited play-by-play caller devote five minutes to dissecting a free kick, while clearly misunderstanding the rules. "You'd love it if they were a little better informed. Because when they get it wrong they send a distorted message to the masses, and confusion sets in and snowballs."

It's hard enough already. Like players, umpires go through troughs of bad form, and stare at the ceiling replaying and rueing their mistakes. Veteran umpire Simon Meredith will never forget his third game, when he paid a free kick but should have paid a mark, leading to an after-the-siren loss for Sydney. "It was a horrible free kick. I got dropped." His confidence was shot, just as it was when he was chosen in the grand final squad last season – yet named as the emergency only. "That was shattering," he says. "Missing out means as much whether you're on game three or game 414."

PHOTOGRAPHY BY AAP, GETTY IMAGES

**G**AME 430 for Stevic is Fremantle versus Carlton in Perth. He drives into the car park of Optus Stadium, ready for the twilight match between two young, spunky sides. As the senior umpire tonight, Stevic has a message for his more junior crew. "You want to be calm, composed and decisive, because you're there to control and manage the game, which is the opposite of what the players are attempting to be: fired up, stimulated, ready to run through brick walls."

Once out there, it's impressive to see their system whirring. They move as an expanding and contracting triangle, surrounding the bubble of players that shifts around the field, so they can afford themselves the best perspective no matter which way the ball zigs or zags. I watch one umpire sprint desperately to get to one side of the contest, so that he can see what the other umpires can't. He's rewarded, or rather the game is, when he spots a free kick – a throw from Blues midfielder Adam Cerra that would have been obscured if the ump hadn't hauled arse.

High above the playing surface, there are three umpire coaches monitoring the match, keeping notes on their successes ("Great communication, Stev") and recording errors that need further examination later ("Hmmm, surely no prior opportunity there?"). The umpires are all wired up, too, which has been the

crackdown won't work in the rougher amateur ranks: "If I umpired the way they do in the AFL, I would be shot." Umpiring is already more difficult than ever before, as players become increasingly ballistic and the rule-book expands with new fine print every season.

The league, of course, goes to great lengths to paint any opposition to this crackdown as breathless, pearl-clutching hysteria, but when a player protests a free kick by lifting his arms with an incredulous smile, and is punished with a 50-metre penalty leading to a certain goal – as happened to Brisbane Lions full-back Harris Andrews – it's easy to see why the fans are spooked. Imagine a grand final decided because a player rolled his eyes, shook his head and muttered, "You've gotta be kidding, mate."

Not only that, but what of the comedy and character and caricature lost – the dramatic pleading appeals of grown men, tragic heroes writhing in agony over a blown whistle, while the umpire plays the pantomime villain in our great vaudeville tradition? It's easy to see the AFL in this moment as the fun police, or even a reflection of the same stubborn Victorian authoritarianism that drove

back room shooshing six-month-old Maeve to sleep. The job was tricky during the COVID-disrupted 2020 season, Millie says, when their family had to relocate into a hub in Queensland with a 13-week-old child, and then again in 2021, when Stevic was on the road for finals, leaving Millie alone at 32 weeks pregnant.

But mostly, they make it work. "The day before a game it's always an early night, with a little chocolate," Millie says, smiling. "Then he loves baked beans on toast the next morning. Before the game, that's when I notice this quietness to him, this focus." She doesn't like going to games. Stevic can tune out the grandstands – screams of "white maggot" become white noise – but Millie hears everything. "Often it's the little old ladies!" she says. "When I go and watch the football now, it takes a bit of the joy away."

That's familiar to Shaun Ryan – a fellow ump who retired in 2020, but also took a three-year break from 2011. He left that first time because his life was too busy – three kids and a career as a barrister – but there was something else, too: big-game stress. "As much as I consciously didn't think it was a factor, I look back at it now and think of how you'd do a big game, and you rock up to work and everyone's asking you about every decision they thought was wrong. It does

*Below, from left: Daniil Medvedev raging at this year's Australian Open; Arsenal players crowding the referee in the English Premier League.*

wear you down." The boos from the crowd are meant to be water off a duck's back – some umpires do say it's like diving under the waves at the beach – but not Ryan. "You hear it. People are in denial if they say they don't hear it. What happens is you become conditioned to it. The great ones learn to be really present, but it's difficult."

Stevic is one of those great ones, although it's hard to know for how much longer. He's 42, and has had four calf injuries in four months this pre-season. The running is one thing, but the ceremonial bounce of the ball at the start of each quarter and after every goal is a more taxing physical manoeuvre – the kind that ruins backs and ends careers. "It's a tradition of the game, a fundamental, that an official bounces an odd-shaped ball," he says, "but that's the only reason to justify keeping it."

Many umpires have been forced to retire when their bodies could no longer rocket the ball into the turf with sufficient force. It's another issue for the AFL to consider, because the talent pool is shallow and ageing, and there are potentially scores of star umpires who will never get their chance at the top level because they can't quite master one archaic skill. "I think that's a crying shame for the sport," Stevic says. "Is the goal to have the best-quality officials in Australia, or is it to compromise that because they've gotta do a party trick two dozen times a game?"

Still, it's a wonderful sight, watching an umpire step towards that circle, then fling their upper body down in a kind of grand royal bow. Stevic reminds himself before every bounce to "Stay over the ball" but what he says out loud as he takes those final steps is: "Here we go."

It's hard to imagine what it's like, to be that figure who physically begins the play in a grand final, in front of 100,000 spectators and a broadcast audience of millions. Stevic says he thinks of tennis great Ash Barty, and her embrace of the maxim that pressure is a privilege. "Do I enjoy the buzz of a big crowd? Absolutely. Does it feel uneasy sometimes? Absolutely," Stevic says. "You've gotta pinch yourself. You're not the centre of it but you're part of it. We've got a pretty good seat in the house." ■

the state's COVID-19 response. Brad Scott is the Daniel Andrews in this example, steadfast and adamant that the new measures are necessary and meaningful, and having an instantaneous impact, the example being set at the top having the desired trickle-down effect on behaviour at the bottom. "I've seen players go to blow up and then contain themselves," Scott says. "To any player who thinks they can't change: well, yes, you can."

AFTER THE game, for the umpires there's no beer and no song, just showers and rub-downs and bits of fruit and Allen's snakes. The umpires sit together and cast their Brownlow Medal votes. (Contrary to prevailing wisdom, they don't have access to statistics when selecting their top three players.) Stevic is barely sweating, with nary a hair out of place. Players often take sleeping pills after night games, unable to flush all that adrenaline. It's hard for Stevic to come down, too, at least until the fatigue settles in. "The exhaustion is all mental," he says. "It feels more like you've been doing a marathon multiple-choice test with a split second for each question. Or like you've been fighting with your missus for two hours – not that we ever do!"

His wife, Millie, 35, thinks the job is a great one, insofar as it affords plenty of family time at home. She's in her final year of a nursing degree, and on the day we meet at their home in South Yarra, Stevic has just dropped Hazel, 2, off at pre-school, and is in the

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