

How CRAIGIE would manage cops

by Brett Williams



Adelaide Crows coach Neil Craig insists that his players, rather than he and his assistants, are the experts when it comes to field battle. But, then, he has always believed that the people who know best about a job are the ones who perform it.

And, since he has not himself performed as a player for almost two decades, he looks to those on what he calls his front line for their invaluable first-hand information.

"I've got a whole range of experts on the front line," he says. "Simon Goodwin, for example, is an expert. I want to know what he thinks. I want to know what sort of environment he wants to play in, because I respect him as an individual, like I do all our players.

"I want their opinions, their ideas of how we can do things better, rather than someone up the top, myself or the assistant coach, just saying: 'This is what we're going to do.'"

For his consultative approach, Craig, 53, sometimes cops criticism from those who see it as allowing the lunatics to run the asylum. But that view in no way dissuades him, as he continues to draw input from his players as a means of helping them.

While he claims no expertise in law enforcement, Craig sees police front-liners just as he sees footy players: experts in their field. He suspects that

cops would have "great ideas" about how best to "make things better in their day-to-day operations".

And, if he were to manage police, he would take the same approach he takes to his management of footy players.

"I'd actually want to know what Narelle thinks," he says, as he raises a copy of the *Police Journal* (February 2009) and points to the cover shot of front-line officer Narelle Janeway.

"In her day-to-day job, how can we make it better? What things do we need to change to make her job better, to make it easier to do. I want to know because she's out there doing it, I'm not. (Just as) I'm not on the field with the players.

"While I've been involved with footy for a long time, I'm not actually playing the game. These guys are.

"So, on the field, they'll pick up information that we, as coaches, won't have because we're not in the firing line. We're not out there doing the battle. We're sitting there watching."

On game days at Football Park, Craig has to focus so intently on his coaching that he never notices the police who walk the boundary and move among the crowd. However, he does often observe the traffic cops who control the mass of vehicle and pedestrian movement around the ground.

He describes them as well-presented, highly professional people who give motorists, including him, the clear

directions they need. But Craig, whose older brother was a police officer in the 1970s, has long held cops in high regard.

"I would suspect that, for the people on the front line, the majority of their work is probably about confrontation," he says.

"I'm sure there are other aspects of their job, but that requires a lot of courage, self-management and responsibility to the community. I'm full of admiration for them."

Not even when Craig has erred on the road and copped a speeding fine has he ever condemned police. "I've found them to be really fair, professional and diligent," he says. "I've never felt negatively about the way they've conducted their business."

And Craig understands just how many aspects of the police occupation run parallel with those of elite-level footy. He speaks of the discipline, teamwork and training; the use of technology; and each profession's unique culture.

"There's the aspect of leadership, too," he says, "and it's not necessarily about what position you sit in. I would think everyone on the front line in the police force has got to demonstrate leadership every day. We talk a lot about it in our environment."

In 2007, Craig sought some high-level police advice, on whether he and his coaching staff could better manage the non-stop game-day action in the coach's box. He called on Assistant Commissioner



Neil Craig with Assistant Commissioner Graeme Barton at the counter-terrorist exercise



Craig addresses his players during a break

Graeme Barton to sit in, observe and offer his assessment.

Craig later attended a counter-terrorist exercise at Barton's invitation, and saw just how police manage a crisis. "We asked Graeme to be involved in our coach's box because we were keen to get someone who's involved in that [crisis management]," he says.

"In the coach's box, you've got all this information coming in that you've got to be able to filter, and you've got tension, you've got people talking over the top of each other.

"So we got some great value out of Graeme sitting in our coaching box and offering some suggestions about how to do it better. We got some fantastic points from him."

Barton remembers that some of those points related to the coaches' communication channels, planning and debrief process. "I found Neil very approachable and inquisitive," he says.

"He was a deep thinker and displayed a high degree of professionalism, leadership and communication skills. He took control when it was required in the coach's box."

Of the many connections which have always existed between police and Aussie Rules football, Craig is certain that one has gone forever. No serving police officer will, in his view, ever again win a spot on an AFL club's list, as a couple did with the Crows in the 1990s.

But, as Craig remembers it, top-level footy was, in those days, "still relatively part-time" and able to accommodate players with other jobs. Today, however, the demands of professional football make it tough for players even to cope with a "bit of study".

Craig, who joined the Malcolm Blight-led Crows as fitness and conditioning coach in 1997, has seen the evolution first-hand.

"Pre-season," he says, "we only used to train three days a week. Now, we're doing 14 sessions a week. The days of combining an elite sport with another occupation are gone."

But Craig rightly points out that those who aspire to careers in both football and policing need not miss out on either. He highlights the case of Crows premiership player Shane Ellen, who joined SAPOL after he retired from professional football.

Ahead now, for Craig, is the rest of a long season of 80-hour weeks in the pressure-cooker environment of senior AFL coaching. The uncompromising nature of his work, however, does not deprive him of job satisfaction.

He speaks of this season's dramatically different team profile, which features "a lot of youth". "That brings enormous enthusiasm, new skill sets, and a different way of thinking," he explains.

"And their enthusiasm to be good players is fantastic. Once you wake up, it makes you want to jump up out of bed,

because you want to get to work with these guys.

"To deal with highly motivated people, is really exciting. They actually motivate me, and I find that an enjoyable environment to be in."

The least enjoyable part of the job to Craig is not the after-match media conference or listening to the countless armchair critics. It is the disappointment he sees in supporters' faces when the team suffers a loss.

In fact, supporter disappointment is one of the reasons he does not rail against the post-match media conference. He sees it as an opportunity to communicate with those pained supporters.

"It's an opportunity to talk to your members about why things went really well," he says, "or why things didn't go so well, or why I didn't make the particular move. Sometimes that's all they want."

But, right now, Craig remains excited about the season ahead, despite what he calls "a lot of newness" about his list and, therefore, "unknown territory".

"We're trying to develop some new concepts," he says. "What I do know is that the playing group that I'm associated with is highly motivated and not putting any limitations on itself.

"With the people who we select to come into our environment, one of the things that we very strongly look for is a mentality that the sky's the limit."

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