

Hooked on sport from the s

by Brett Williams



If police management was to ask Bruce McAvaney where to look for a good recruiting ground, he would point straight to the AFL. That might seem to be odd advice, given the serious trouble some footy players have wound up in on the roads, in nightclubs and on end-of-season trips.

But McAvaney, one of Australia's most credible sports commentators, reckons 98 per cent of the AFL clubs' players have precisely the values police forces would want in their recruits.

"I know players mess up," he says, "but leadership and good values are now instilled into footy players in a big way. The AFL runs a lot of programmes, and the clubs get experts in.

"I've been there when (players) have been spoken to by experts in different fields, about how to treat women, how to handle alcohol, the drug temptations, and the community.

"It's not a bad place to recruit, because they have already been educated in a way that I think would measure up to the values of the police force."

And, to McAvaney, the player whose career ends prematurely – because of injury or delisting – would be the most obvious target for recruitment.

Of course, some serving cops would love to play professional sport, as others have at the highest levels, without quitting police work. Senior Constable Matthew Kluzek and now former STAR Group sergeant Paul Patterson each played for the Adelaide Crows in the 1990s.

But McAvaney thinks it virtually impossible today to combine a career in pro footy with another in policing. "I think to be a good police officer, you've got to be totally committed," he says. "And to be a good (pro) sports person you've got to be totally committed."

Renowned for his meticulous research and memory for stats, however, McAvaney knows that many countries' Olympic Games athletes are indeed police officers. He speaks of the Italians, top Ethiopian runners, and Germans who compete in the luge.

"But, in our society," he says, "we're not going to just give somebody a token job with a title and let them go off and play football. That's not going to happen in the South Australia Police."

Still, McAvaney sees it as a shame that opportunities do not exist for police officers – with the ability – to excel in pro sport. He would love to see a career pathway that would allow them to be cops and sports stars simultaneously.

"Let's say Kurt Tippett (Adelaide) or Jason Porplyzia (Adelaide) or Travis Boak (Port Adelaide) was in the police force right now," he says. "Wouldn't it be good if they could do both? It would also be very good for the police image. It would make it more personal."

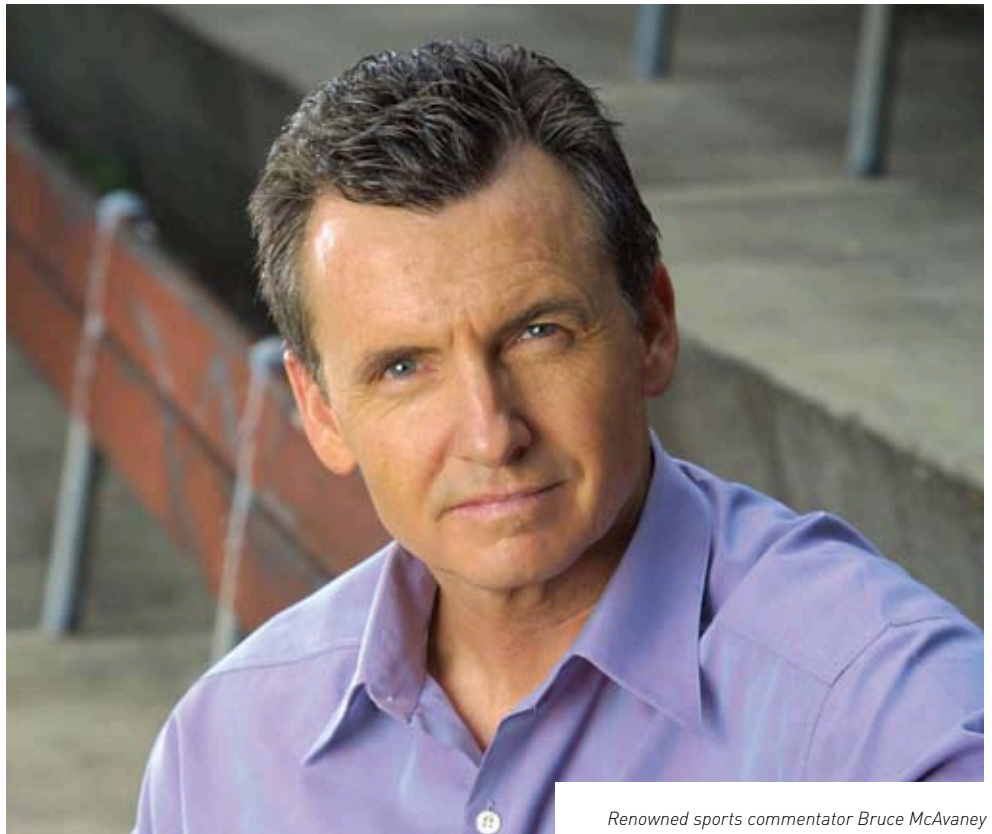
Of course, for McAvaney, the Ferryden Park boy who became the most recognizable sports commentator in the nation, a police career was never on the cards. He had already focussed his world on sport when he was little more than a toddler, calling pretend horse races.

At the track, where his parents sometimes took him, he loved the look of the horses and the skill of the jockeys. And, then, McAvaney heard the voice of masterful Melbourne race-caller Bill Collins, whom he wanted to emulate.

"I loved the way he called, the excitement he put in his voice, and the thrill it gave me to hear a close finish," he remembers. "I just got hooked on it."

But, for inspiration, McAvaney never had to look beyond the walls of the modest but happy Housing Trust home he grew up in with his family. His mother and father, who had played netball and football respectively, both filled him with the wonder of sport.

"They encouraged me," he says,



Renowned sports commentator Bruce McAvaney

“with stories of great sportsmen and sportswomen they had seen, and how they (sportspeople) had made them feel good and influenced them.”

Today, McAvaney, 56, has no less passion for sport, and sports commentary, than he had as a child. Sports fans can still hear it in his unmistakable calls of footy matches and his coverage of Melbourne Cup carnivals and other events.

His television career kicked off in 1978 with the job of reading sports news on Channel Seven in Adelaide. Since then, he has travelled the world, covering such events as the Olympic Games (seven times), the winter Olympics (three times), the Commonwealth Games (twice) and the World Athletics championships (six times).

McAvaney has also hosted and/or commented on eight AFL grand finals, the Bathurst 1000, Australian Open tennis, Australian Masters golf, the Bledisloe Cup, Tri-Nations Rugby, the Rugby World Cup and the World Swimming Championships.

As a guest speaker at a recent luncheon, he listed his 10 most memorable sports events, which were:

1. Cathy Freeman’s victory in the 400 metres at the Sydney Olympic Games in 2000.
2. Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt’s victories in the 100 metres, 200 metres

and four-by-100 at the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008.

3. Makybe Diva’s third consecutive Melbourne Cup win in 2005.
4. The contest between sprinters Carl Lewis and Ben Johnson in the 100 metres at the Seoul Olympic Games in 1988.
5. The world-title fight between welterweights Thomas Hearns and Sugar Ray Leonard in Las Vegas in 1981.
6. The 1986 Cox Plate, in which Bonecrusher beat Our Waverly Star by a neck.
7. Moroccan middle-distance runner Hicham El Guerrouj’s victories in the 1,500 metres and 5,000 metres at the Athens Olympic Games in 2004.
8. The round 14 clash between St Kilda and Geelong in 2009.
9. The 2003 Rugby World Cup, which Australia lost to England.
10. Lleyton Hewitt’s Davis Cup semi-final victory over Roger Federer in 2003.

McAvaney called each of these 10, except the Rugby World Cup, which he hosted, and the Hearns-Leonard fight, which he went to as a representative of Channel Seven. But he sat ringside, among boxing icons such as Mahommed Ali, Larry Holmes and Bloody Jake La Motta.

The St Kilda-Geelong match, which McAvaney listed at No. 8, struck him as the most “competitive, skilful game of football” he had ever seen – “by quite a margin”.

“I believed that at the time,” he says, “and I’m just as convinced now. The two teams had won 13 consecutive matches. That has never happened before. And the only thing stopping it from being the best game of all time is that it wasn’t a grand final.”

The Freeman victory was, according to McAvaney, just part of “an amazing night of athletics”.

“Four years of expectation and she won!” he exclaims. “And, after that night, when I walked out of the stadium, a lot of international broadcasters all said that it was the best night of sport they’d ever been to.”

With all the sports he loves, McAvaney naturally finds it hard to pick out favourites. But the few he does manage to come up with are track-and-field (Olympics), thoroughbred horseracing and Aussie Rules football.

“They’re the three sports that have been the biggest for my career,” he says. “I’ve seen what I think is the best sport, and that’s been the Olympic Games.





Bruce McAvaney: "The police have made a major contribution to the enjoyment of sport..."

"If I could only do one thing now; if they said: 'Look, your career's finished, you've got one more job to do,' I'd do track-and-field at the Olympics.

"Week in, week out, the most important sport to me is AFL football, because it sustains your whole year and it's got a big audience and a lot of interest. I get asked more about football than any other sport. People love to talk about it.

"But, for pure interest and joy, it's the horses probably as much as anything. I love them and I'm very interested in them."

While McAvaney finds it tough to nominate a favourite sport, he finds it near impossible to rate someone as the world's best athlete. He takes great care not to confuse "best" with "most famous".

"In my lifetime, Ali's been the biggest figure," he says. "But is he the best? That's a different question."

Among other candidates for "best" status, McAvaney nominates Chicago Bulls player Michael Jordan, soccer legends Pele and Diego Maradona, tennis great Roger Federer and golfer Jack Nicklaus.

"I've been lucky enough to spend a week with the Chicago Bulls and do interviews with Jordan and see him close up," McAvaney says. "He's freakish!

"The best is impossible to say, but I'm not sure that I've seen better athletes

than Michael Jordan, Carl Lewis and Usain Bolt.

"Lewis was just a magnificent, beautiful runner and long-jumper – nine Olympic gold medals. And Bolt's the six-foot-five freak who moves so beautifully."

McAvaney believes that, in Australia, the title of greatest sportsman still clearly belongs to the late Sir Donald Bradman, whom he met but never saw in action. But does he dare declare an Aussies Rules player as the best of all time?

"Well," he says, "the best one I've called is Wayne Carey. I'm not saying that he's the greatest player of all time, but I think he had more influence on matches than anyone I've seen."

Beyond the high-achieving athletes, McAvaney rates police as "superb" at the work they do, too, particularly in maintaining order at sports grounds. Their input has impressed him for decades.

And he suspects that 98 per cent of the crowds at grounds such as Adelaide Oval and Football Park at times think: "Thank God the police are here. We're in good hands."

"The police," he says, "have made a major contribution to the enjoyment of sport in this country, by being present and providing a safety net for good sport."

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POLICE ASSOCIATION OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

2010 Annual Dinner to honour Retiring Members

DATE: Friday 25th June 2010

VENUE: The Adelaide Convention Centre
North Terrace ADELAIDE

TIME: 7.00pm for 7.30pm

DRESS: After Five

TICKETS: \$100.00

(includes 4-course meal, beer, wine and soft drink)

RSVP: Anne Hehner – Phone 8112 7977