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It was like a knife through the heart. Coaching floored Michael Voss, but now one of the game's greatest players is back and ready for his chance at redemption.

Michael Voss was standing in his Adelaide kitchen with wife Donna and was probably talking too much.

It was September 21 and Voss had earlier taken a call from Carlton head of football Brad Lloyd, who asked the Port Adelaide assistant to fly to Melbourne the next day.

The two parties had previously interviewed each other about the vacant coaching position at the Blues, but Lloyd wasn't giving Voss a heads-up this time, either.

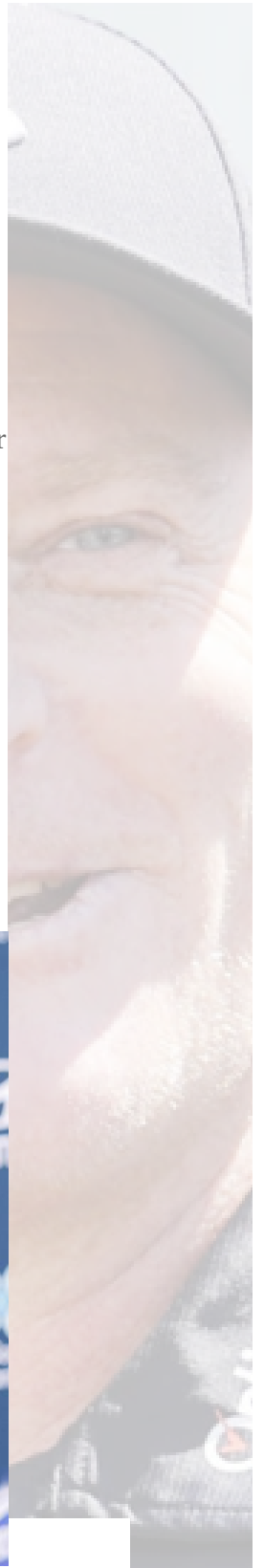
Voss's mind danced with possibilities. Was it really happening? Was he the favourite for the job, or down to the last two? How long would he have to quarantine for? Am I a senior coach again?

Then Donna — his young sweetheart and wife of 25 years — arrived home from work.

"I said to Donna, 'they've asked me to come over to Melbourne and they wouldn't be asking me if it was not pretty serious'," Voss recalls.

"I said, I'm going and I don't know when I'll be getting back.

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Michael Voss is thrilled to be back coaching with the Blues. Picture: Getty Images

“I remember, we’re standing in the kitchen and there was a pause, and it dragged on, and it was quiet, and I said: ‘What are you thinking?’

“And she said: ‘It’s a big job, are you sure you’re ready for it?’

“I said: ‘Well, I did ask for it, so I can hardly be fearful of it. So, yeah, I feel like I’m ready.’

“But what a great question, are you sure you’re ready?”

Donna had to ask.

Mind you, Voss has asked himself a mountain of questions since being sacked as coach by his beloved Lions a lifetime ago — it was August 2013 — and then again in 2019 when the Blues overlooked him for David Teague and then again in 2021 when Collingwood chose Craig McRae, his one-time Lions teammate, to replace Nathan Buckley.

It goes without saying there’s a major difference in skill sets between being a player and being coach.

“It’s funny,” Voss says. “We spoke today. Who would’ve thought 20 years ago we’d be here today, me coaching Carlton and him coaching Collingwood.”

From then to now is a generational transition and in Voss, who was appointed Carlton coach on September 22, here is the living proof even the greats are required to climb off the canvas.

He’s done it as coach.

He also did it as player.



Michael Voss after breaking his leg in 1998.



Leigh Matthews arrived at Brisbane for the 1999 season, his first of 10 seasons at the Gabba, and his best player and captain was recovering from a snapped leg.

Playing against Fremantle at Subiaco in round 11, Voss broke his lower leg in half. It was so bad there were fears the 1996 Brownlow medallist wouldn’t be the same player on his return.

That the skipper made it back for round 2, 1999, and would become an All-Australian that season, was typically tenacious and inspiring.

“You always figured he would recover and even though he played magnificently after his broken leg, I still think his broken leg had a negative impact from that point onwards,” Matthews says.

“He recovered from the leg, but then you put pressure on other joints, so he always had a knee soreness, different things popped up.

“Whatever Michael Voss did after his broken leg, if he didn’t break his leg, he would’ve done more.”

It was a pivotal period on the sidelines for Voss.

An inspiring and brilliant player, he was determined to return an inspiring and brilliant leader.

“Often, what gets written about is your achievements, rarely written about are the significant moments that have shaped what you’ve done next,” Voss says.

“At that period, I had actually achieved a fair bit on the field and that year, the total year, was a disastrous situation at the club despite the talent we had. There was this paradigm shift for me to realise, that for me to be better, it was going to take more than just me to do it.

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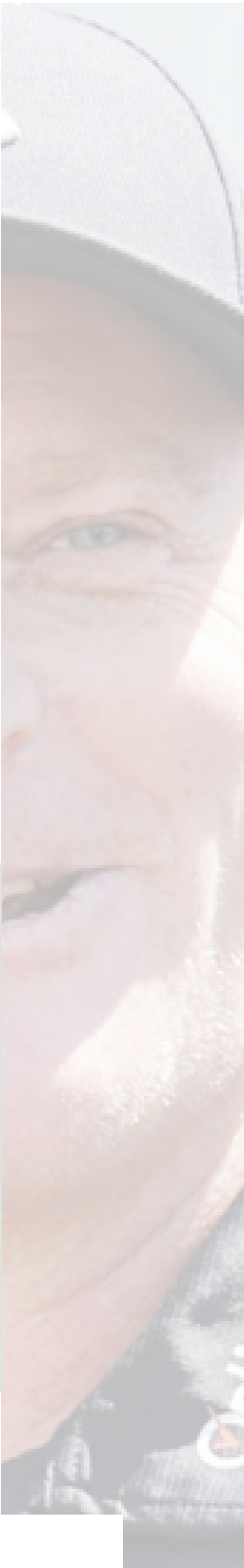
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“So any goal I had from that point on was about what the team could achieve. To do that, I needed a lot of people. The priorities in my world shifted largely from what I felt was on me to everyone else. That’s where my leadership and my approach changed. My purpose





changed. And at the same time, an awesome leader (Matthews) stepped into the football club, who gave real direction and who challenged me as a leader in more ways than he probably knows.

“He wanted me to take the lead on the field, take charge, and that’s what I tried to do for him. That was a pivotal moment for me, not so much the talent I wanted to bring to the table, but more so the influence I could have.”

Matthews replaced John Northey as coach.

Northey was sacked after the Lions lost to the Dockers by 12 goals and while Voss was in a Perth hospital recovering from his leg operation.

That week, then Lions chairman Noel Gordon sat at the end of Voss’ hospital bed and asked his captain: What do we do about the coach?

Voss didn’t sack Northey.

“No, that’s not my role, but what I can say is there is a disconnect between the coaches and the players right now,” he says he told Gordon.

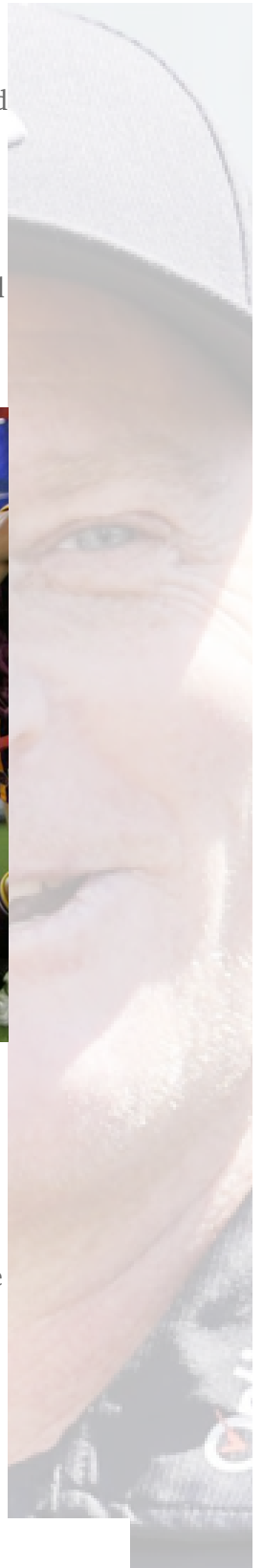


Michael Voss was the one of the great leaders in the AFL. Picture: David Kapernick

Days later Northey was given the chop, Matthews was talked into relocating north and Voss, at 23, was on the verge of announcing himself as an AFL legend.

Post broken leg, he was a three-time premiership captain, two-time MVP winner, four-time All-Australian, three-time best and fairest winner and four times was awarded the AFLPA best captain award.

All up, he played 289 games and, with Matthews, formed arguably the most formidable coach-captain team in football history.



“Anyone who has had anything to do with Vossy has enormous regard for his character, his drive as a person,” Matthews says. “You have just so much admiration for him.”

Port Adelaide coach Ken Hinkley says: “He’s extremely humble and a great family person. He’s got all the things you want people to be. All of them. You just hope your kids grow up to be like him.”

Voss retired as a player at the end of the 2006 season. He had proven himself indestructible on the field and, everyone opined, the world was at his feet.

He chose media and a role at AIS over an immediate role at club level, but it was only a matter of time before an official would knock on the door.

That came in February 2008.



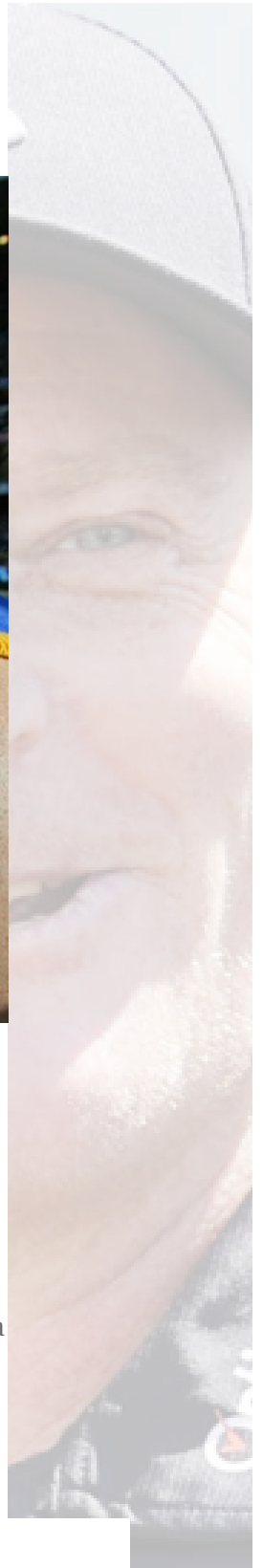
Leigh Matthews and Michael Voss celebrate after the 2003 premiership. Picture: David Kapernick

TONY Kelly, then the Lions chairman, had a succession plan in mind.

With everyone having to agree, it would be out Matthews, in Voss at the end of the 2008 season, the favourite son replacing the favourite coach.

Matthews, Voss and Kelly met in February, and although there was lukewarm agreement, a commitment to a handover date could not be reached. So, the succession plan faltered.

Enter West Coast. The Eagles chased Voss throughout 2008 to be an assistant coach and he eventually signed a contract. Then, at the end of 2008, Kelly again knocked on Voss’s front door. This time, he told Voss that Matthews had decided to step down.





The lure of his old mob was too great. The Eagles gave Voss their backing and he accepted the Lions' job.

"You can be in the right place and the right club at the right time or you could be at the wrong club at the wrong time," Matthews says. "For Vossy, it was the wrong club and the wrong time, and I'm not sure any other coach would've done better than what Vossy did."

After playing finals in his first season as coach, which included a provoking week one finals win over Carlton after being five goals down at three-quarter time, Voss was 4-0 in his second season and his team on top of the ladder.

Then, it all caved in. The Lions won three more games for the season, four games in 2011, 10 in 2012 and, having won eight of 18 games in 2013, was sensationally sacked with four games to play.

It was reported the club made the move because it feared a walkout of players. The more popular belief was the club wanted Voss gone so it could pursue Paul Roos.

Fifteen years after being first put on the canvas as a player, Voss was back there, this time angry and humiliated, after the club he led to three flags — and now chaired by Angus Johnson — told him he no longer could help them. It was a knife through the heart.





Ken Hinkley hugs Michael Voss. Picture: Sarah Reed





Michael Voss talks to Power players. Picture: Sarah Reed



Michael Voss loved his time at the Power. Picture: Mark Brake

Time mostly always is a healer. It has to be, because if you can't heal, how can you be mentally healthy?

"When you have anything bad happen in your life, you have to make peace with it at some stage," Voss says. "And I made peace with that a long time ago. At the time, it hurt a lot."

What would he do differently? He wouldn't have accepted the Lions job, he says.

At the same time, he says, the Lions situation helped shape him.

“It’s been eight-nine years, so there’s just been some natural evolution,” he says. “You go on a self-discovery, you work on your shortcomings and there’s a lot of humility that comes with it as well. You have to accept the scenario for what it is and go to work on yourself.”

Which means climbing off the canvas again.

“You can’t be flippant and say that’s an easy thing to do, but I’m more hardwired that way,” Voss says.

“It becomes a bigger challenge for me. There have been moments where you ask yourself, is this what I really want? I’ve had that a couple of times. The first time was after what happened at Brisbane and the next time was when the whole competition was stood down because of Covid.

“But I just kept coming back to the one thing ... it’s my passion and I love doing it.”

Ken Hinkley knew Voss the player very well. As an assistant coach to Mark Thompson at Geelong, he tried to plot the downfall of Voss and the Lions many times and failed.

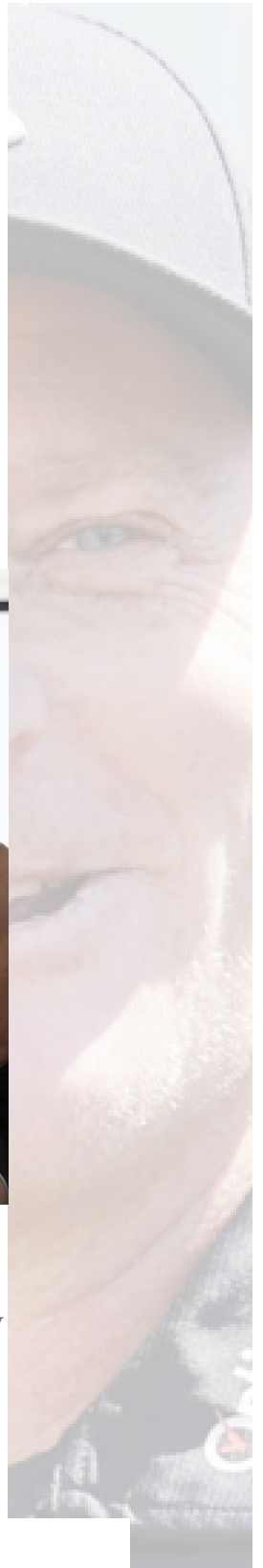
So when Hinkley’s assistant Shaun Hart, another former Voss teammate, said his nemesis would be interested in joining Port Adelaide at the end of 2014 season as an assistant coach, he was all ears.



Michael Voss talking to Port Adelaide players during a meeting. Picture: Sarah Reed

“You say he got off the canvas, you know he was a boxer don’t you, and Michael will really connect with that because he likes his boxing,” the Power coach says.

Did he arrive with a little bit of tail between his legs or arrive as the greats always do, with a little bit of swagger?





“He had his presence, 100 per cent he had the presence of Michael Voss and today he still has that. I view him as the great Michael Voss, the player. But he wanted to coach again, he wanted redemption and he got the opportunity he deserves,” Hinkley says.

Despite being a senior coach of almost four seasons, Voss had to learn many aspects of coaching when he arrived at Port.

“He knew how to play, and at Port he learnt plenty about coaching,” Hinkley says.

“As a coach, you want go out and fix it yourself. As a player, Michael could go out and fix almost any problem himself.

“Here, he had to learn how to coach the game, not just do the game, and he had to learn how to teach people with lesser talent how to do the game, and that means spending hours on that player.

“He was sensational from the start. He never had a problem with working, he was a beast when it comes to working.

“Ask Ollie Wines. He would talk glowingly of Michael.”

Wines does.

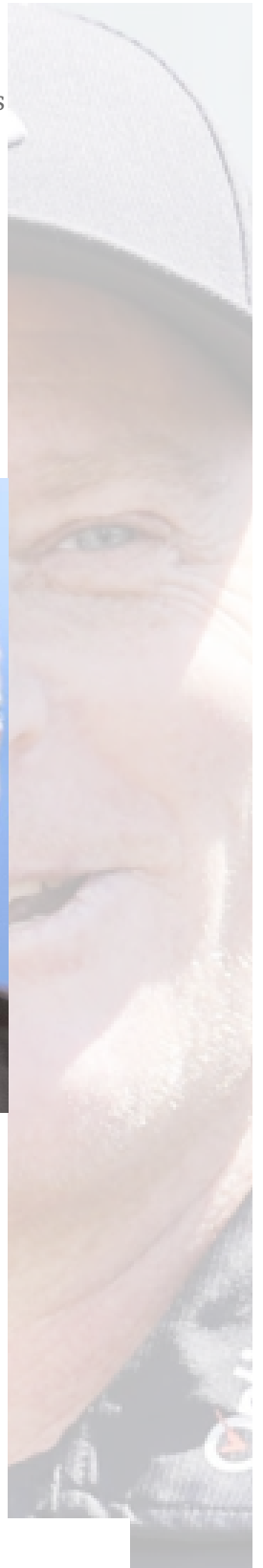


Michael Voss speaks to the media in 2013 after being sacked by the Lions. Picture: AAP Images

“Vossy is the ultimate motivator, he’s the best at motivating that I’ve ever seen in my life,” the 2021 Brownlow medallist says.

The quest for redemption, or at the very least another opportunity, has taken Voss seven years.

Asked to describe the difference in Voss from then to now, Hinkley says: “It’s so clear to me. The aura and presence has never changed, the understanding and knowledge has got



much greater, and he's an educator. He also has a great handle on the buzz word called connection."

Matthews says Voss now has a "good background to go coaching".

"When he first started, he went straight from playing and he had never worked behind the scenes at a club. He got the job because of the enormous regard everyone held him in," he says.

"Now, he's got a fantastic background. Sam Mitchell has had a very small coaching background and there will be exceptions to the rule, but 10 years in the system behind the scenes should be the prerequisite to go coaching."

It is also clear in Vossy's mind.

"This is not a long answer, but the difference between then and now is you've got great clarity on what you believe works and the environment you want to have, the program you want to put in place, the people you need around you, the style you'd like to play," he says.

It's a different mindset to the one he had entering the Brisbane job.

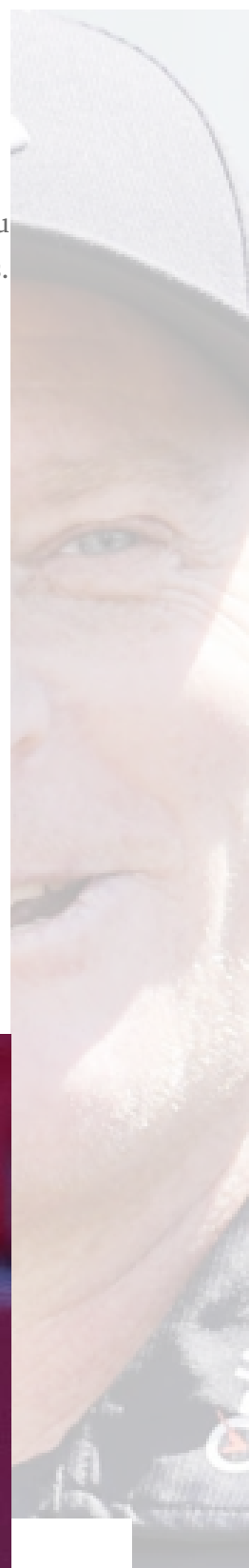
"If my time at Brisbane was defined by the thought I could do it, that's very different to now. There's a lot more pieces to this big puzzle," Voss says.

Excitement abounds with Vossy and Carlton.

There's the new coach, the new president, Luke Sayers, and the new chief executive, Brian Cook. And, fingers crossed, Charlie Curnow's knee will hold up.

For Voss, who is 46, he has a second chance at a big Melbourne club and this time round he doesn't arrive at the club as the messiah.

"I would say I'm grateful, extremely grateful," he says. "It's taken a lot of hard work to get here. It hasn't been easy, it hasn't been gifted to me. I've had to accept what needed to come my way, I've had to go to work and get myself better and then you hope after all the work, someone gives you an opportunity and Carlton has been that."





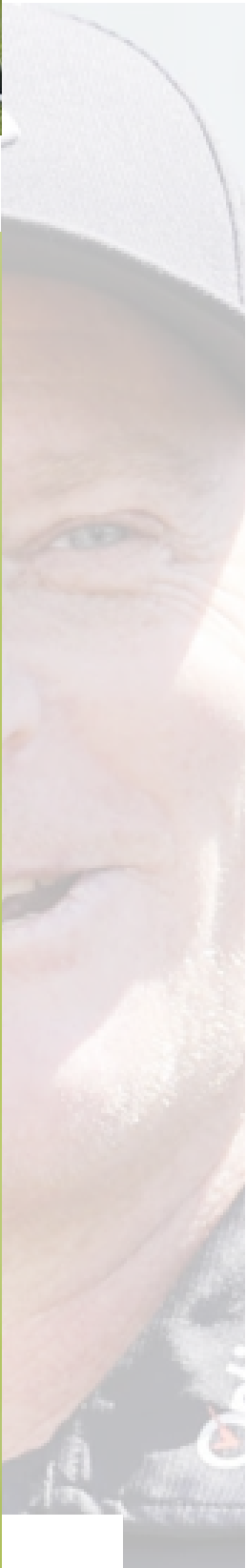


Voss with Paddy Dow. Picture: Michael Klein





Voss works with Tom De Koning. Picture Getty Images







Voss with Lachie Plowman. Picture: Michael Klein

“I’m pretty determined to repay that gratitude, but I’m also realistic, we’ve got a fair bit of work to do.”

Matthews rarely lets emotive thoughts override practicalities, but this time he did and his hopes for his premierships are high.

“I find the older you get the more you appreciate the people who were part of your journey,” he says.

“To go back further, Tony Shaw was an unbelievably good captain and leader at Collingwood. The Lions had a lot of strengths and that’s why they were a good team, but Vossy was captain, his leadership, his whole person was so influential to the Lions’ success. The people who — and what’s the word? — the people who got you the success in a sense not only have my enormous respect but also my gratitude.

“On that basis, you just hope the people who helped you on your journey can continue their successful journey. That’s how I’d enunciate my attitude towards Vossy, and Chris Scott and the others, too, but particularly Vossy, because even in modern footy the relationship between coach and the captain is just critical and I had that relationship with him.”

Vossy adores Matthews — and vice versa — but it’s Hinkley who has had the greatest impact in the second half of Voss’s football career.

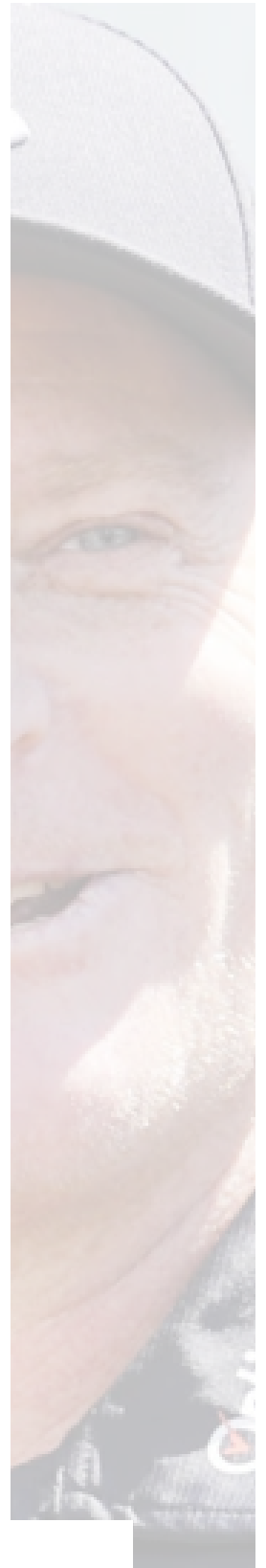
Clearly, Voss arrived at Port Adelaide willing to learn.

“One of the big things I learnt with Ken ... he helped me go to work on myself as coach, whether that was teaching people how to play the game, teaching people how to lead, or whether it was creating an environment which brought out the best in people. They were all challenges in the past seven or eight years that I grew enormously with Ken,” he says.

“I really loved my time with Ken. He taught me an enormous amount about the game and what I loved was, he gave me the room to be the coach you want to be and he always backed you in.”

Hinkley says that if Voss delivers a premiership to Carlton, it would surpass his accomplishments as a player.

“We both love the underdog and we both love that he’s getting off the canvas,” he says. “It would be huge.”



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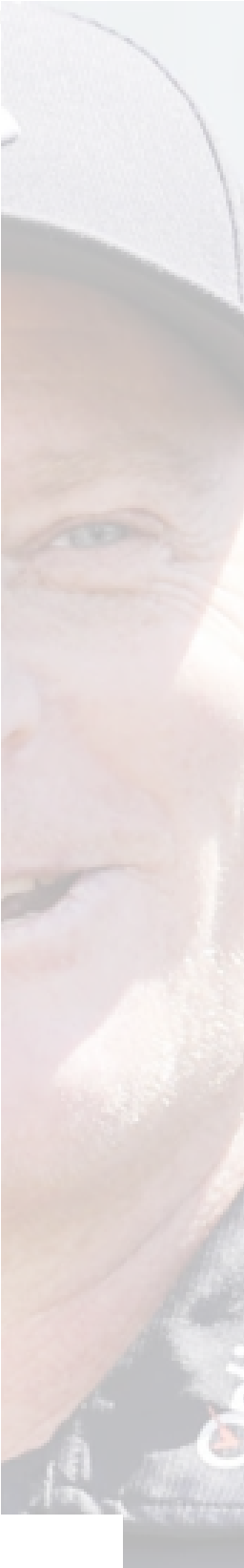
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Michael Voss has a renewed vigour at Carlton.