



If there was any trouble off the field, these blokes could generally find it, but when the game was on the line, they could be relied on to perform match-winning deeds on it. They have enjoyed their good times and while they are older and a little wiser these days, their bond endures and their fierce loyalty to each other is palpable as they banter about the good ol' days at Collingwood. **BEN COLLINS** gains a rare insight into what made these marvellous, miscreant Magpies tick.



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It's a bond  
that'll never  
be broken

DANE SWAN

**MISCHIEVOUS MAGPIES:** Alan Didak, Dane Swan and Ben Johnson miss playing together but are enjoying life after football.  
PHOTO: ROB PREZIOSO/AFL PHOTOS



For more than a decade, Collingwood's notorious 'Rat Pack' baulked umpteen media requests for a group interview. And who could blame them, given the endless fascination with their nocturnal exploits. So there was some excitement at the *AFL Record* offices when three key Rat Packers – Dane Swan, Alan Didak and Ben Johnson – finally agreed to their first on-the-record, round-table chat.

Much like their eventful careers – which culminated in the Magpies' 2010 premiership – it proves well worth the wait. On a sunny Wednesday afternoon in winter, we're immediately reminded that we're taking a walk on footy's wild side.

Asked whether they mind if we record the interview, Didak quips: "No worries – just don't give it to Mick."

Of course, he's referring to 2010 Collingwood premiership coach Mick Malthouse. And so began a long, entertaining lunch with the Pies' larrikin brotherhood at their venue of choice – a Japanese restaurant in Hawthorn.

Two other Rat Packers had planned to be here, but Chris Tarrant is a late withdrawal and Heath Shaw (who had remained in Melbourne during the Giants' mid-season bye) is at a funeral.

Outside the AFL bubble, our easygoing trio are enjoying less-scrutinised and comparatively stress-free lives.

Didak and Johnson are now fathers (as is Tarrant) and do 9-5 jobs – Didak, 34, owns INDI Wines and is a consultant at Multigroup Logistics, while Johnson, 36, is a business developer with long-time Collingwood corporate partner Bluestar Logistics.

The more recently-retired Swan, 33, owns Renegade Art Society tattoo studio in Moonee Ponds and clothing label Ratbaggy, and continues to create headlines as an international man of leisure in his "gap year".

Most notably, Swan finished runner-up in Channel 10's *I'm A Celebrity ... Get Me Out Of Here*, filmed in the South African jungle. In six weeks he lost 14kg, to drop

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PHOTO: ROB PREZIOSO/AFL PHOTOS



● The Rat Pack often incurred the wrath of coach Mick Malthouse for waxing on the field.

Johnson: "Mick would always send out the message: 'Stop kicking it to your mates.' In junk time, they're the only blokes I'd kick to, to get the stats up."

Didak: "You just knew that if you could push off your opponent it would be lace-out – well, maybe not with Swanny."

Swan: "Hey, it'd be in your general vicinity. We're not all blessed with ridiculous skills like you."

Swan adds: "At centre bounces I knew exactly where Johnno would be storming off half-back and he'd abuse me if I didn't give it to him. But if I did give it to him, Mick would get into me. I couldn't win."

## “We see it as a term of endearment. We love it

DANE SWAN ON THE RAT PACK NAME

### LARRIKIN BROTHERHOOD:

The Rat Packers don't see each other as much as when they were teammates, but when they do they immediately slip back into the old groove.

below 90kg for the first time in 10 years.

The 2011 Brownlow medallist is in great shape, apart from wrists that barely bend and a right foot problem that ended his career and will eventually require fusing.

Didak and Johnson also have niggles but, unlike Swan, are a little over their playing weights.

Johnson plans to reunite the Rat Pack at his local Eastern Football League club Doncaster. Swan isn't convinced so Johnson playfully admonishes: "Just do as you're told, Dane."

Old habits die hard. Two days earlier, Swan and Johnson watched their Pies lose to Melbourne in the Queen's Birthday clash, after which they "kicked on" 'til late.

"We've definitely settled down, but we still have our moments," Johnson says, a glint in his eye.

Much like their original Hollywood namesakes, privately they have other names for their rebel fraternity, calling themselves "pigs" and "piglets".

Johnson explains: "We eat, we drink, we party hard – we're pigs."

Swan: "And you have to earn your pig status."

There's some conjecture over the origin of their Rat Pack label, with the contributors including Malthouse and former CEO Gary Pert.

Johnson: "Mick started it. We got in trouble outside footy and he said to me: 'You and your scaly mates! Bloody rats!'"

Didak: "'Perty' said, 'There's a group at the club called The Brat Pack', and then the *Herald Sun* called us The Rat Pack."

Swan: "And when someone got in trouble, they had all of us looking like rats on the front page. And it stuck."

No offence was taken – quite the contrary in fact.



Swan: "Not many other groups of players have been given a name. Whoever coined it did well.

Some people like to see something offensive in it, but we see it as a term of endearment. We love it. It's amazing what it's become. Every time I go to a footy club (for a speaking engagement), people say, 'Here's our Rat Pack.'"

Didak: "Most clubs have a Rat Pack, whether it be division seven or AFL."

Johnson: "Most organisations have one." Swan: "And being at Collingwood, it gets magnified."

They're equally amused and bemused by all the fuss, given they regard themselves as simply a tight-knit band of knockabouts who love a good time, who have only ever done "normal things" for men their age, and who "just happened" to be stars at the game's biggest club.

About a dozen Pies have been labelled Rat Packers since the early 2000s, but Johnson says the core comprised Tarrant, Didak, Swan, himself and Rhyce and Heath Shaw.

The others – whom Johnson calls "second-tier" members – included Dale Thomas, Dayne Beams and Sharrod Wellingham. Before them were the likes of Andrew Dimattina, Ben Kinnear and Heath Scotland.

They explain the criteria for entry into the Rat Pack.

Swan: "You had to be consistent on and off the field. You needed a couple of things on your rap sheet."

Johnson: "You had to be caught doing something, by either the law or the club."

Swan: "Collingwood was the law we had to deal with."

Johnson said they were caught by the club only about five per cent of the time. And he reckons only 10 per cent of those indiscretions hit the media.

Swan: "It was all in the natural realm of being lads, but I'd had so many chances that I was told a couple of times, 'If this gets out, we won't be able to save you.'"

They question whether they would have survived in the AFL now, and whether they would have been prepared to make the required social sacrifices.

However, they suspect the overriding factors would be their love of the game, mateship and the lack of a better career alternative.

Without footy, Swan believes he would have become a wharfie like his father, VFA great Bill Swan; Johnson would have become hands-on in his father's plaster off-cut removal business and Didak suggests he would have been a factory hand.

Swan: "As a young bloke, I was going out Thursday night



● The Rat Packers love their moniker so much that they plan to trade off it.

The four chief members – Dane Swan, Alan Didak, Chris Tarrant and Ben Johnson – are set to launch Rat Pack Tours, which will kick off with next year's soccer World Cup in Russia.

They hope to expand to other sporting events such as the NBA playoffs and the Super Bowl.

Swan knows what they're in for, given that last month he led a Dane Swan On Tour group to New York.

Asked how much punters would pay for the pleasure, Swan says: "Who cares – it's priceless."



and Friday night before a Saturday game, and then I'd go out Saturday and Sunday night.

"This was just before camera phones. If you did that now, there'd be photos of you on social media and you'd be suspended or sacked."

Swan says he doesn't have regrets because he did it his way, while Johnson regrets "partying too much" in 2007-08, leading to a form slump.

For all the stories of late-night escapades, these proud Pies are keen to make a couple of points.

"We had a good time and we mucked up at times, but that isn't all we did," Swan says.

"We're premiership players, All-Australians, best and fairests, Brownlow medallist. Well, most of them are mine."

The other two laugh as Swan continues: "When the game was there to be won, it was usually someone from the Rat Pack who stuck their head over the ball and did something."

Johnson: "We also had the respect of our teammates. We'd go out after a game, but the next morning we'd train harder than anyone."

Swan: "Speak for yourself, 'Johnno'."

Didak, the Pies' former clown prince, raises the club's much-critiqued culture.

"The biggest myth was that we had a culture problem," he says.

"Mick had us in the palm of his hand. Our change rooms were

**I was told a couple of times, 'If this gets out, we won't be able to save you'**

DANE SWAN

humming. We knew exactly what was required and in 2010-11 we felt like we could smash anyone."

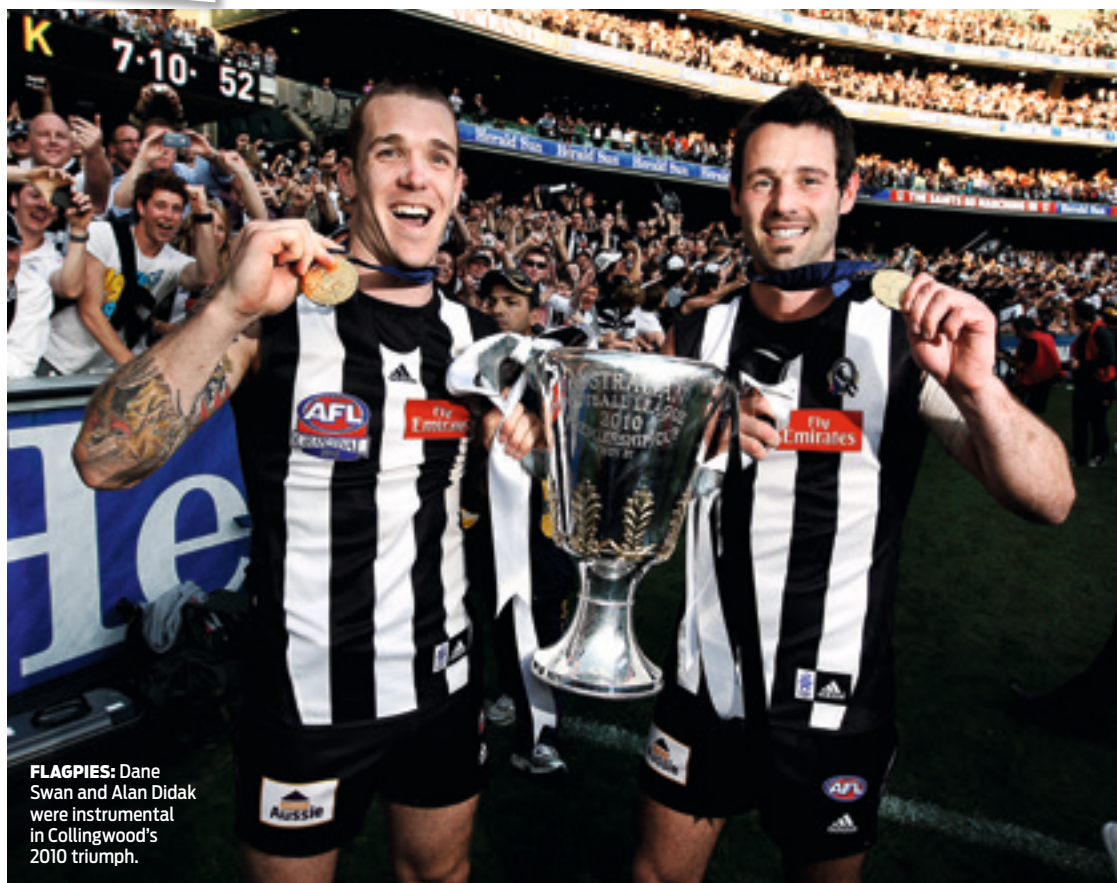
Swan: "It was a winning culture. I hated training more than anyone, but I loved going to the club then because we'd win and have fun."

Johnson: "From '06 to '11, we had the best culture."

And the Rat Pack helped create that environment.

They influenced each other (the classic example being Johnson dragging along a young Swan on the track while Tarrant guided him in the gym) and had a significant impact on the team.

Swan: "One year everyone had to write down their top five influencers in the group and, even though none of us were in the leadership group, five out of the top seven names were from the Rat Pack."



**FLAGPIES:** Dane Swan and Alan Didak were instrumental in Collingwood's 2010 triumph.





Johnson: "It was basically 'Maxy' (captain Nick Maxwell) and the Rat Pack. They all wanted to be us."

Malthouse came to love his rough diamonds, and they in turn loved him as a father-figure, leader and mentor, observing that he managed them as well as any coach could have.

Johnson: "Mick understood you need different personalities and that we needed to do things differently. You can't win a flag with 22 robots. And he was a great motivator – he had me in tears at least five times when he was addressing the group, and even he'd start crying. I would've run through a brick wall for Mick."

Swan: "He knew what made people tick. As part of the core 15 blokes, if we played well we might be allowed to miss a session. Johnno hated doing weights so Mick mightn't make him do them."

Didak: "The only time Johnno did weights was just before we'd go to (Las) Vegas (at season's end)."

Malthouse had a profound influence on their careers, but Swan feels they were destined to become quality players regardless because they had great pride in their performance.

Swan: "I didn't give a rat's off the field, but I did on it. No matter how much I got up to (socially), I wanted to be best-on-ground every week. I just *hated* playing bad. Mick was great but it wouldn't have mattered who coached me."

Malthouse recently told Channel Seven that no one worked harder or gave more to Collingwood in his time there than the Rat Pack. However, their relationship was regularly tested.

**TOTAL RESPECT:** The Rat Pack loved coach Mick Malthouse (above) and lauded the leadership of premiership skipper Nick Maxwell.



## “The biggest myth was that we had a culture problem

ALAN DIDAK

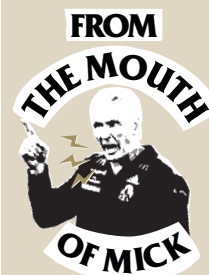
Swan: "We're very loyal to each other and we've always got each other's back, even if it meant sometimes lying to coaches and others about breaking team rules and stuff."

Johnson: "We lied at least once a month."

At times the Rats were ratted out, but they "copped it sweet".

Swan: "We were also punished if we didn't hit KPIs, and one time there were 10 names in the hat and nine of them were mine."

Swan always ignored the edict to arrive for pre-season training in good shape, telling the club: "It's called



● Dane Swan and Ben Johnson say they were former coach Mick Malthouse's "whipping boys", and Alan Didak wasn't spared either.

Swan: "Before our game reviews, Mick would tell our video guys, 'Just get me something on Swan or Johnson so I can yell at them.' He told me once, 'You're killing your teammates and I don't know why they'd want to play with you.' That was a little harsh."

Johnson: "Mick got me on the phone on the bench and said, 'You think you're a million dollars, but let me tell you something, son – you're FIVE CENTS!'"

Didak: "We wanted to prove him wrong. After we got thrashed once, Mick said, 'Dids, you were useless!' I thought, 'What about the previous six weeks when I went OK?' I was fuming – I shook my head for about a minute. In our Monday meeting I got in trouble for that and for breathing heavily!"

Swan: "In my early years, Mick often told me, 'Pull your socks up. If you're not going to play like a footballer, at least look like one.' He'd even send the runner out to tell me."

During the Magpies' 2007 semi-final win over West Coast in Perth, the suspended Johnson sat in the coach's box and made the mistake of cheering after a crucial late goal. Malthouse screamed: "Ben, get out! No one cheers in my box!"



**MATES FOREVER:**

The 2010 premiership strengthened the bond shared by Rat Pack members Heath Shaw, Ben Johnson, Dane Swan and Alan Didak.



the off-season, not the pre-pre-season. Let's just see who's one of the best-on-ground in round one."

Nearing the end of one off-season, Swan and Didak started jogging on a Mexican beach when a "knackered" Didak stopped after 50m because he felt like he was running in quicksand. Swan quit 50m further on. "At least we did our recovery in the ocean," Didak said.

They lauded the "incredible" leadership of Maxwell, who often sought Rat Pack perspectives.

Swan: "Maxy would tell us, 'I know what you guys are doing. Just don't influence the young guys.' We respected that."

Johnson says after belting St Kilda in round 16, 2010, the Rat Pack vowed not to drink until season's end.

Swan: "Ben, I find it really hard to believe that we went cold turkey for 10 weeks."

Didak: "Nah, we set that rule for everyone else, but kept doing it ourselves."

Swan: "Yeah – do as I say, not as I do."

Didak earned plaudits for his bravery to play the entire finals series with a torn pectoral – "My arm was actually ripped off," he jests – but he's quickly cut back down to size.

Swan: "That's nothin' – I got a corky in the first final."

## “We'll be doing this when we're 60

BEN JOHNSON

Johnson: "And my knee had to be jabbed to train and play. At least you could run, Dids – jeez."

Late in the drawn Grand Final against St Kilda, Johnson was tracking Stephen Milne when a bad bounce denied the Saints goalsneak a potentially match-winning goal.

Johnson: "The first bounce was worse than the second one."

Didak: "I pictured Milne walking in for a goal."

Johnson: "I pictured it too, mate – I would've walked straight off."

Didak: "I wouldn't have talked to you ever again."

Johnson: "Hey, come on, I was in the back 50 one-out for five minutes. How about one of you blokes dropping back? Me, Maxy and Heath saved you boys."

After their big win the next week in the Grand Final replay, the players left for overseas trips on the Tuesday.

Swan wishes they'd spent a week celebrating around Melbourne first.

There was greater lament the next year when Collingwood dominated the minor rounds but lost the Grand Final to Geelong.

Swan: "I've pushed it out of my brain." Tarrant had returned to the Pies after four years with Fremantle.

Johnson: "'Taz' went over there and matured and came back a nerd. He really wanted a flag and he even tried to stop us drinking."

In 2010, Swan claimed his third successive Copeland Trophy and the next year he won the Brownlow Medal, but insists: "I'd gladly trade all my individual awards for another flag. But I'd trade the flag if it meant I wasn't going to be lifelong mates with guys from that team."

Swan, the last Rat Packer to depart Collingwood, says: "I thought Dids had at least another year and we should've kept Heath, but Johnno was well and truly cooked."

Johnson retorts: "You rang me after each training session in tears wanting me to come back."

Serious again, Swan says: "It's like we never left each other. It's a bond that'll never be broken."

Johnson: "After footy, not many players keep friendship groups, but we'll be doing this when we're 60."

@bencollcollins



● Rat Packers Alan Didak and Heath Shaw lifted their teammates with brilliance on the field and comedy off it.

Johnson: "They're the two funniest guys I've ever seen at a footy club."

Swan: "They'd have us in tears of laughter at training. It was infectious. Weights would stop for 10 minutes just to watch them do something stupid, whether it was jumping out of a bin to scare someone or doing a funny dance."

Johnson: "Dids is actually a good dancer who moves really well, but he does these other moves that are hilarious."

Swan: "If we'd been beaten, it gave us a lift."

Didak: "It wasn't planned or anything – I was just a clown who liked making the boys laugh. Win, lose or draw, I'd do something."