

# MOSQUITO FLEET

BLUES'  
MEN OF  
STEEL



It has been a dismal year for Carlton fans, so here is a rare treat to soothe Blue souls: a gathering of the famous Mosquito Fleet, who reminisced about the days when their club was the envy of all.

**BEN COLLINS**

## 5 KEN SHELDON

Height: 178cm Weight: 76kg  
Games: 185 (Carl 132, St K 53)  
Goals: 194 (Carl 170, St K 24)  
Premierships: 1979, 1981, 1982

## 37 WAYNE HARMES

Height: 177cm Weight: 85kg  
Games: 169 Goals: 86  
Premierships: 1979, 1981, 1982

## 34 ALEX MARCOU

Height: 178cm Weight: 76kg  
Games: 145 (Carl 121, St K 24)  
Goals: 163 (Carl 146, St K 17)  
Premierships: 1979, 1981, 1982

## 16 JIM BUCKLEY

Height: 175cm Weight: 72kg  
Games: 164 Goals: 146  
Premierships: 1979, 1981, 1982

## 7 WAYNE JOHNSTON

Height: 180cm Weight: 82kg  
Games: 209 Goals: 283  
Premierships: 1979, 1981, 1982

## 14 ROD ASHMAN

Height: 175cm Weight: 76kg  
Games: 236 Goals: 370  
Premierships: 1981, 1982



Carlton's famed and feared Mosquito Fleet confounded many of David Parkin's strict beliefs about the effect of partying on performance.

Early in his first pre-season as Carlton coach before the 1981 season, Parkin observed that after each training session many of his players – his boisterous band of little men among them – gathered at a local watering hole.

One night Parkin stormed into the pub and gave the boisterous Blues one of his famous vein-bulging barrages.

"I'd heard the rumours and innuendo, but I can't believe what I'm seeing," Parkin thundered. "This is going to change!"

The players' solution, Parkin told the *AFL Record* with a chuckle, was to simply go to another pub.

"They were as wild a bunch off the field as the game has ever seen," he said. "But when it came to preparation and playing, I was amazed because I haven't had a better, more committed group."

Told the *Record* would catch up with the Mosquito Fleet, Parkin gushed, "Oh well, just put some money over the bar and you'll be in for a memorable afternoon."

So we followed the coach's orders, arranging what proved to be a long lunch at the Emerald Hotel in South Melbourne, a haunt of some of the old Blues in question.

The Mosquito Fleet – which was so instrumental in Carlton's 1979 and 1981-82 premierships – had a full membership of about a dozen and we gathered the six mainstays.

Rod Ashman is 60, both Wayne 'The Dominator' Johnston and Alex Marcou are 57, while Jimmy Buckley, Wayne Harmes and Ken 'Bomba' Sheldon are each 55.

While reminiscing, they lived up to their collective nickname, buzzing with chatter and laughter and taking every opportunity to pester each other, albeit in a brotherly way, as they have done for 30-odd years.

"Jeez, the mosquitoes have gotten bigger over the years, haven't we," Buckley observed. "Harmesy, I feel a lot better now after seeing you!"

Marcou's arrival prompted the greeting: "Here's the short, back and shoulders." It is a dig at Marcou's once-hirsute shoulders. He now waxes.

Those shoulders are concealed by a shirt from the Mosquito fashion label that Marcou established (but has since sold).

Sheldon: "It's quite apt that it's such a good-lookin' shirt, because we were very fashionable."

In fact, Marcou and Johnston appeared in advertisements for Opal Male Fashion, one of which



can be found on YouTube. The mere mention of "the Opal models" prompts giggles.

Johnston: "That was a bad ad. I've never been more embarrassed in my life."

Conversation flowed. Some cracking stories can't be retold here, but would be classic sportsmen's night fare.

They say they were first referred to as the Mosquito Fleet in a newspaper story in 1979, and came into being because Carlton lacked tall forwards, with Mark 'Sellers' Maclure the only regular key target in attack.

Buckley: "Sellers dropped it most of the time but at least he'd make a contest so we'd get the crumbs."

Sheldon: "I reckon the nickname was coined because 'Ashy' (Ashman) was a real pest to the opposition and also to us. When he was roving, he'd only give us young apprentices a brief run on the ball."

Buckley: "We'd get five minutes if we were lucky."

Ashman: "Not that long."

Sheldon: "Well, five minutes between us – just to keep us interested."

Ashman: "We had it all worked out, didn't we?"



**MOSQUITO MAGIC:** Rated by former coach David Parkin as the equal of any running brigade he has seen, the Mosquito Fleet included 1979 Norm Smith medallist Wayne Harmes (above), Alex Marcou (left) and elder statesman Rod Ashman (top right).

“They were as wild a bunch off the field as the game has seen

COACH DAVID PARKIN



Buckley: "You had it worked out."

Parkin rates the Mosquito Fleet the equal of any running brigade he has seen.

With the exception of Harmes, a backman who enjoyed the odd run in the centre, they split their time between the midfield and attack.

All six represented Victoria and between them amassed 1121 games, 1249 goals and 16 top-five placings in the Blues' best and fairest.

Their greatest strength was their diverse skills. As a group they were brilliant, tough, explosive, versatile, calculating, supremely confident and utterly ruthless.

Marcou: "We were all quick, we had fantastic ball skills, we were damaging and on our day we could all kick a bag of goals."

Ashman: "And they couldn't tag all of us."

Harmes: "You knew that if you were having a dirty day, someone else here would just ignite."

Johnston: "And we didn't have many dirty days."

Buckley: "If it wasn't working, we didn't wait for the coach; we switched things ourselves."

Harmes: "Most of our coaches gave us open slather to take risks."



Buckley: "We could all do something inspirational to lift the team."

Of the six, only Johnston and Ashman were named in Carlton's Team of the Century.

It could have been so different – in 1979 Ashman applied for a clearance to North Melbourne and the Demons were keen on Johnston after he starred in the 1978 VFA Grand Final but needed a clearance from the Blues – so Carlton's effort to retain them was significant.

Their ex-teammates agree they probably would not have enjoyed as much success without them.

Ashman missed the '79 flag with injury, but the other five – who were aged just 19 to 21 – were pivotal performers in not only that Grand Final but the season as a whole.

Harmes won the Norm Smith Medal and was runner-up in the best and fairest and Sheldon was the club's leading goalkicker with 53, while Johnston, Marcou and Buckley also averaged around 20 touches and more than a goal a game.

Harmes: "We were able to do that because at 14 or 15 most of us were filling in for open-age teams, which was one of the greatest learning curves."

Buckley: "When I was 15, I played on a murderer they'd let out of jail for the afternoon. I kicked five goals on him in a half and he said, 'If you kick another one I'll have you shot.' That was a fair initiation."

Some Mosquito Fleet magic lifted Carlton to the 1979 flag, with Harmes famously chasing up his own errant kick to knock the ball back from the boundary to set up Sheldon's match-winning goal.

Harmes' effort was the subject of a Toyota television commercial in 2006.

Buckley: "Hold on. Harmesy got all the credit and all the money out

of it with his Toyota ad, but without my knock-on to him, his knock-on would never have happened."

There was indeed a knock-on effect. In a scramble near half-forward, Buckley had wisely tapped the ball into Harmes' path.

Then familiarity played a role.

Sheldon: "If Harmesy was streaming downfield, there was no point leading. You generally had two options: go straight to the centre because he was going to kick a 70m goal, or run to the boundary line because he'd spray it, which he did. My anticipation has also been overlooked in Harmesy's glory."

Harmes: "I had it all planned knowing that 30 years later Toyota was going to kick in."

Johnston acknowledged Harmes' heroics but declared the game-changer was fellow Fleet member Trevor Keogh.

Johnston: "People forget we didn't kick a goal for the first 45 minutes while Collingwood had five."

Marcou: "Jezza' (Carlton coach Alex Jesaulenko) said, '(Russell) Ohlsen's killing us. Who's going to look after him?' Trevor said, 'I will' – and he did."

Johnston: "Then we kicked five goals in nine minutes."

Among them were goals to Harmes, Buckley (two) and Sheldon.

Keogh received a reprimand from the Tribunal.

Buckley: "Harmesy, give your Norm Smith Medal to Trevor. That's nearly as bad a decision as when 'Klomp' (teammate Robbert Klomp) was given a TV (for best on ground after having just nine touches in a 1981 night series match)."

Despite their size, Johnston and Buckley were renowned hard men.

Buckley: "We did things others probably wouldn't do." ►



Johnston: "That's the way footy was back then."

Marcou: "You knew everyone had your back and you had theirs."

Buckley: "Even if they couldn't fight, they were all in there."

In 1980, when an injury-ravaged Carlton suffered a straight-sets finals exit in their only season under Peter 'Percy' Jones, Sheldon was felled by Richmond backman Graeme Landy, who copped a four-week ban for striking and missed out on a premiership.

Buckley: "One of us got him back because he had some blood trickling out of him in one game against us. Was it you, Ashy? A lot of people don't realise that you were dirty."

Ashman shakes his head and says: "We certainly looked after each other, though."

And they still do.

Ashman suffered a stroke five years ago but says he is fine now. Harmes picked him up and will later return him home. On this occasion Ashman was the quietest member of the group but laughed along, even when jokes were made at his expense.

His mates admire him as one of their early mentors – on and off the field. They credit Ashman with creating the "third wingman" – a high-risk, high-reward tactic whereby he would run to space on the wing and wait for the Blues defenders to rebound the ball to him for an easy kick.

Marcou said premiership teammate Peter McConville wanted a message relayed: "Make sure you write that the only reason the Mosquito Fleet were any good was that I kicked it to them from the backline."

They praised the efforts of their defenders but didn't specifically mention McConville. Instead, they remain in awe of superstars Bruce Doull and Geoff Southby, who they say were key members of their "great support crew", which also included Maclure and big men Mike Fitzpatrick and David McKay.

Sheldon: "We'd get a blast from the coach for not helping out the defence and we'd say, 'But Ashy's our role model and he's never set foot down there.'"

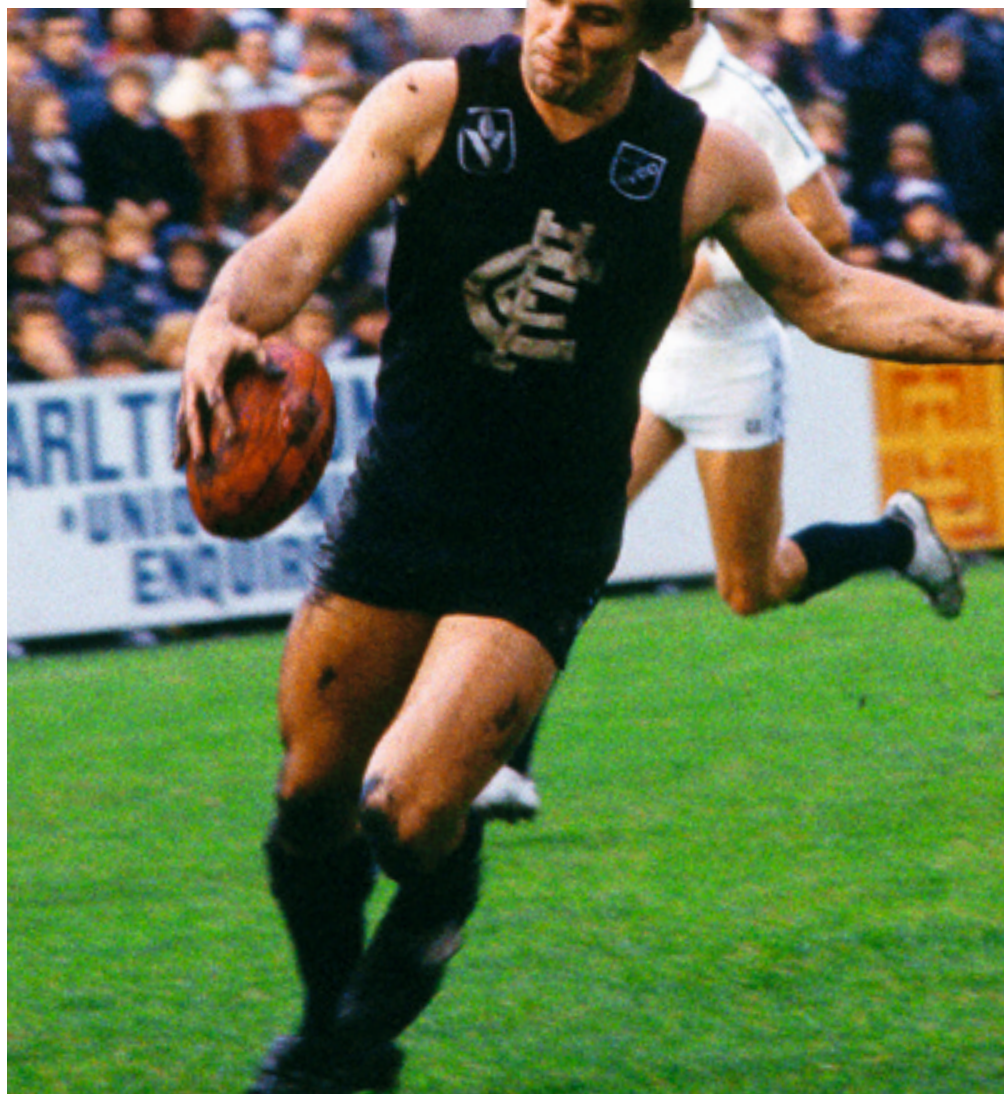
Ashman: "Didn't have to with our backmen. It would've been an insult to offer them help."

Sheldon: "That's right. Why crowd our defence and cramp their style?"

Ashman: "Anyway, we made them look good, especially 'Doully.'"

Sheldon: "Yeah, his four best and fairests can be attributed to what we did with the ball once he won it back and got it to us."

Buckley: "I never ran to the wing like that – I was in the engine room."



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ALEX MARCOU



**IN THE RIGHT SPOT:** Ken Sheldon kicked the match-winning goal in the 1979 Grand Final after Wayne Harmes famously knocked the ball back from the boundary line.

Johnston: "I never got to the wing – I never went that far up the ground."

Sheldon: "There was a queue of us out there – we should've been selling tickets."

Late in Parkin's last season as Hawthorn coach in 1980, the Blues belted the Hawks at Princes Park, after which Parkin derided "the Carlton cheats" for their habit of running forward of the ball.

The next year, new Blues coach Parkin tried to change the ingrained practice.

At half-time of an early game, with Carlton trailing, Parkin demanded they help their backmen.

On the resumption of play, the ball immediately went into Carlton's backline and Ashman automatically ran to the wing.

Parkin roared, "Go and tell that bloody Ashman ... !"

Unbeknown to the coach, the public address system had not been turned off and his message boomed out around the ground.

Ashman replied with a smile and a wave.

Parkin was always going to struggle to curb his players' social lives. No one

went as hard as the train-hard, play-hard, party-hard Blues.

Parkin's first pre-season camp with Carlton was in Thailand in late 1980 and proved an eye-opener.

One night the players celebrated McConville's buck's night and on their way home they saw Parkin setting up witches' hats for their morning training session on Pattaya Beach.

Sheldon: "Parko' gave us a gruelling running regime but we did it on our ears, half-charged. That's when he thought, 'I don't know what I've got here.'"

So how did they combine these competing interests?

Harmes: "Easy. There's a time for hard work and a time for fun."

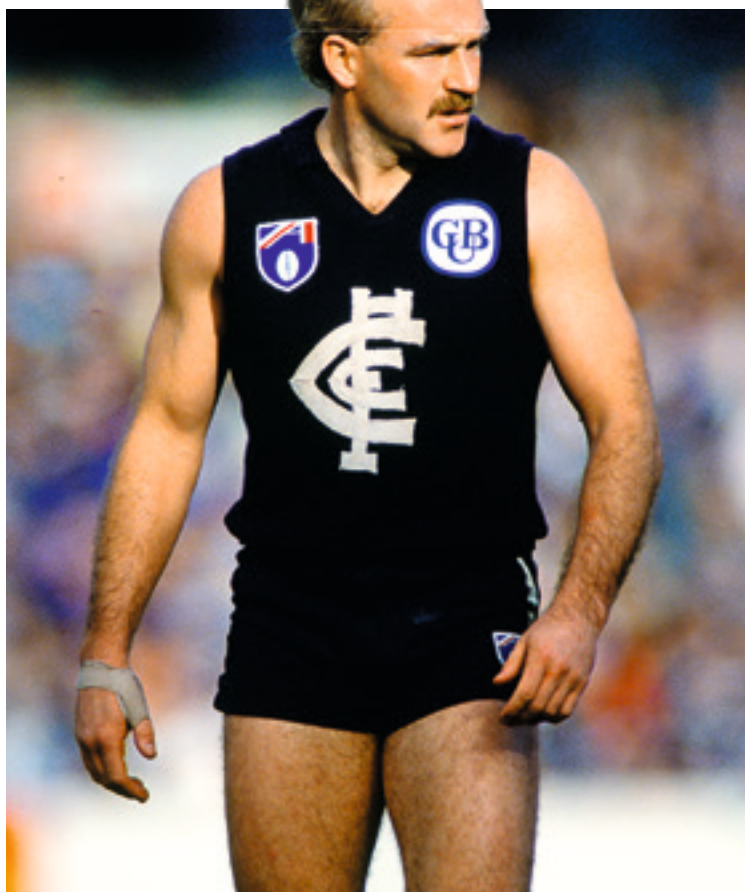
Sheldon: "Just as Jimmy exemplified when he won his best and fairest in '82."

Buckley: "Then I went to a party at Ashy's joint and a nightclub afterwards and got glandular bloody fever."

Parkin says the Mosquito Fleet was at the forefront of Carlton's player-driven culture, delivering critiques in a comical but cutting way to ward off complacency.

Buckley: "We played bloody hard off the ground but we had





## ANGE FOR COACH

► During a lunch with the Mosquito Fleet back in June – just three weeks after the sacking of coach Mick Malthouse – the only pall on proceedings was the plight of their beloved Blues.

At the time, the club was still looking for a new coach and Ken Sheldon was on the selection panel. (Brendon Bolton has since been appointed to the position.) Sheldon happily accepted suggestions from his old mates.

Harmes suggested the job should go to fellow selection panel member, Socceroos coach **Ange Postecoglou** (which Harmes first pronounced “Costepoglou”), “to teach them to kick the ball along the ground – because they sure as hell can’t kick it properly in the air!”

Sheldon: “And he’d give us a good defensive pattern.”

Carlton fans would also love a modern version of the Mosquito Fleet.

Marcou: “We’d kill it. We had everything.”

Buckley: “With all the cameras, we couldn’t be as dirty though.”

Johnston: “But we’d get more rest with all the rotations.”

Buckley: “That’d be great – more time to listen to races.”



a great hunger to win, we had great leadership qualities and we wanted to keep performing to the level we were renowned for, so we demanded the best from each other.”

Harmes: “We only accepted excellence.”

Marcou: “These days a player makes a mistake and his teammates pat him on the bum, but we’d cop it. If Bomba didn’t pass to me how I expected, I’d have a go at him. Same thing if Ashy didn’t handball.”

Buckley: “You never handballed, Ashy.”

Ashman: “I was never taught to.”

Johnston: “You blokes always bagged me for not handballing, too.”

Sheldon: “It could be a brutal retrospective during our pleasant Sunday mornings.”

Ashman: “But it had to be done the right way. Soon after ‘Buzz’ (Peter Bosustow) joined us, he had a go at a young guy and a few of us put him back in his place.”

Harmes: “If anyone got ahead of themselves, they’d be brought back to earth very quickly.”

Johnston: “I got ahead of myself calling myself the Dominator at a nightclub, and I copped it hard the next morning at training.”

Johnston is hailed as one of the great finals players and could easily have won multiple Norm Smith Medals.

Johnston: “As a forward it was easy to lead to these blokes.”

Buckley: “I’m staggered the Dominator isn’t in the (Australian Football) Hall of Fame. He rose to the occasion and did the hard things and the skilful things.”

Johnston is one of just 12 official legends in Carlton’s Hall of Fame. (The other five Mosquito Fleeters are club Hall of Famers.)

Marcou: “Do you worry about that stuff, Dom?”

Johnston: “Couldn’t care less.”

One item of footy history Johnston does care about though is his missing 1982 premiership jumper.

He recently received a phone call from a stranger, who claimed to have the guernsey and offered to sell it to him for \$5000. Johnston was considering his legal options.

Harmes swapped one of his premiership jumpers with Collingwood hulk Rene Kink.

“It might fit me now,”

Harmes quipped.

The triumphant Blues of 1981-82 still pinch themselves that they were invited to post-premiership functions hosted by then Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser – a Carlton fan – and wife Tamie at The Lodge in Canberra.

Marcou: “Not many people get invited to the Lodge.”

Harmes: “Not many people would be silly enough to invite us back a second time.”

Sheldon: “Even fewer would’ve broken an ankle there.”

Sheldon is referring to a woman who was Marcou’s date at the PM’s residence in 1981 and broke an ankle after taking a tumble down the stairs.

Marcou told the story at a Spirit of Carlton function in 2011. It’s on YouTube.

An amused viewer was another former PM, Julia Gillard, who told Marcou such gatherings would not be permitted at The Lodge now because of the media attention it would attract.

Parkin laments that Carlton’s dynasty doesn’t receive enough attention, as it rarely rates a mention when discussion turns to the greatest teams. The Mosquito Fleet agrees.

Johnston: “After we won in ’79 we lost our coach and president (George Harris), then finished (just percentage off) top spot under a new coach, and then went back-to-back under a third coach. No one else has done that.”

 @AFL\_ben collins

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JIM BUCKLEY



**ENFORCERS:**  
Despite their size, Jim Buckley (above left) and Wayne Johnston were renowned hard men who gave as good as they got.

