

DOUBLE = ACT =

Essendon CEO Xavier Campbell and Hollywood actor Travis Fimmel have shared a special bond that stretches back to their junior footy days.

BEN COLLINS

It's the little-known yet enduring mateship between an AFL club CEO and a Hollywood star. Essendon chief Xavier Campbell and acclaimed actor Travis Fimmel knocked around together in country Victoria, were junior football teammates, lived together in Los Angeles during a virtual gap year in their early 20s, and remain in regular contact despite leading busy lives in high-profile occupations on different continents.

In speaking to both men, and others, the *AFL Record* also learned more about Fimmel's brief trial at St Kilda.

Fimmel – who starred in popular historical drama *Vikings*, crime series *The Beast* alongside the late Patrick Swayze and 2016 film *Warcraft* – is filming Vietnam War movie *Danger Close: The Battle of Long Tan* in Queensland, so he and Campbell caught up before Essendon's mid-season clash with the Brisbane Lions at the Gabba.

"Xav and I are great mates," Fimmel said. "We've done lots of stuff together and had lots of great times."

Campbell smiles broadly when speaking about Fimmel, nicknamed 'Rangi' after a barefoot character in the *Footrot Flats* comic strip because he rarely wears shoes.

"Rangi is extremely loyal and a very good friend," Campbell said.

The loyalty is mutual. The Bombers' CEO had arranged for Fimmel's father Chris – a Saints fan – to attend this round's Essendon-St Kilda game at Etihad Stadium, but Fimmel senior wasn't well enough to accept.

Neither Fimmel, 39, nor Campbell, 38, have forgotten where they come from.

Fimmel was born into a sporting family – his father had tried out at St Kilda and his uncle John Forbes was Puma's popular national promotions manager who influenced the careers of many League footballers and other sportspeople.

The laidback larrikin grew up on a 3500-acre dairy farm near Lockington ('Locky') in northern Victoria and spent considerable time in the Murray River town of Echuca, where he attended school and played footy with Campbell.

He and Campbell were among the best players in Echuca's junior teams.

"Rangi's reputation as a footballer has grown with his reputation as an actor," Campbell said.

"He wasn't brilliant – in fact, he was a terrible kick who mastered the helicopter – and he wasn't a great trainer, but he was a tough, hard, honest ruck-rover who you loved as a teammate because he'd back you up and he'd win the hard ball and give it to outside players like me."

The self-effacing Fimmel responded: "Yeah, I wasn't a good kick – that's why I handpassed so much. But Xav didn't need any help – he was a very skilful player. He won a premiership with (SANFL club) Sturt (in 2002)."

Fimmel stood out from the pack in various ways – he developed the

eye-catching ability to scoop a loose ball one-handed and pass it between his legs like a basketballer to confuse opponents; and, reminiscent of Collingwood great Billy Picken, he commented as he played.

"We found it amusing, but I'm not sure the opposition did," Campbell said.

Fimmel explained: "It was about entertaining the boys and annoying the opposition."

"It started with warning players I was gonna tackle 'em. And when I got the ball I might say: 'Rangi gives it to Xavier, and if he misses this goal he'll look stupid!'"

"I just loved being out there with my mates and having some banter."

It's tempting to suggest Fimmel played football like a viking.

"Rangi would give it and take it and just get on with it. And whenever he was in a blue, he'd be smiling," said another former teammate, Julian Farley.

Farley recalled a school game in which Fimmel asked a teammate what the score was and, on learning they were behind, turned the game in the space of a few minutes.

In another school game, Fimmel "dacked" Campbell – they were on opposing teams – at a throw-in in front of a large student crowd.

"It was the most embarrassing moment of my life," Campbell winced.

Fimmel respected Echuca's then playing coach Simon Eishold, the former Melbourne and Richmond player, because "everyone wanted to take him out, but he'd run straight through them – fairly".

Eishold, now an Echuca committeeman, said: "The kid could play, no question. And he had a good family that was active in the footy club."

"But we missed out on 'Fimm' at senior level because he became too good at other things."

In 1997, like his brothers Casey and Marcus before him, Fimmel won Echuca's under-18s best and fairest, despite missing several games.

"Some silly voting that year," he said.

Fimmel had a similar response when crowned the 2017 Actor of the Year in *GQ Australia's* Men of the Year Awards, declaring: "I demand a recount."

When Fimmel accepted his under-18s award, he brought the house down with the cheeky opening line: "Well you can't pick your coach ..."



THE ACTOR AND THE CEO: From junior football in Echuca (inset) to Los Angeles and back, Travis Fimmel (centre) and Xavier Campbell (right), pictured with another mate, Joel Williams, at the 2016 Hollywood premiere of *Warcraft*, have remained great friends.



“I was invited to St Kilda and was soon invited to leave

ACTOR TRAVIS FIMMEL ON HIS BRUSH WITH AFL FAME

At the end of the year, the 18-year-old moved to Melbourne to study project management and pursue his AFL dream.

Of Fimmel's pre-season tryout at St Kilda, Campbell quipped: "I assume he tricked someone into believing he was better than he was."

Saints recruiter John Beveridge revealed Fimmel had been recommended by a talent scout and recalled the youngster "didn't have much meat on his bones".

He lasted a few weeks.

"I was invited to St Kilda and was soon invited to leave," Fimmel said. "I was never gonna be selected on my training form."

Fimmel briefly played for amateur club Ormond before suffering a broken leg. It proved a lucky break because he went overseas and became a star.

The most understated star imaginable.


"Trav has always been a left-of-centre character, but he's incredibly authentic," Campbell said.

"Every year he comes home over Christmas, and we don't talk about work; it's more about what's happening back home, friends, farms and fishing. Living in LA hasn't changed him one bit."

Meanwhile, Fimmel lauds Campbell for guiding the Bombers through their greatest crisis.

"Xav was only 34 when he took on that huge responsibility at such a tough time," Fimmel said.

"Not many people could stand that pressure. It's an amazing achievement."

"I'm very proud of him." 

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