

WEEKNIGHTS 7.00

WARWICK CAPPER

WHEN THE WIZ ROCKED WAVERLEY

When it comes to self-promotion, former Sydney and Brisbane star Warwick Capper is in a class of his own. But back in an era of high-flyers in the 1980s, Capper could more than hold his own, including an absolute screamer he took in the qualifying final 30 years ago.

BEN COLLINS



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arwick Capper rubs his hands together and laughs maniacally, flashing a mouth full of new, luminous teeth.

"This is gonna be the best day of your lives," the inimitable Capper declares to the *AFL Record* crew.

The flamboyant former Sydney Swans star can't contain his child-like excitement because we're taking him back to Waverley Park for the first time in 30 years.

The first time since the 1987 qualifying final against Hawthorn, when Capper achieved his two greatest individual highlights: becoming a century goalkicker, and taking his self-proclaimed "Mark of the Universe".

Earlier, we'd met Capper at the multi-million dollar home he shares with his longtime partner, fiancée Lisa.

We were led down into Capper's man cave – a shrine to his football career and celebrity – where Capper set the tone with a barrage of one-liners.

Our shamelessly vain host held aloft a bottle of Capper-brand shiraz and announced: "I'm ageing better than this fine wine."

Capper's vintage is 1963, making him 54. "But I only look 36," he says.

He openly admits to having minor facial work especially for our photoshoot, explaining: "People expect 'The Wiz' to look good – and I haven't let them down yet."

Capper thinks of himself as both the greatest marking and marketing machine in footy history. And he isn't done yet.

He's the face of a gym, eateries including Capper's Big and Tasty Food Diners, an accounting firm, a butcher's shop ...

For years he has appeared as a celebrity-for-hire at sportsmen's functions and other gatherings.

Now there are plans for a reality TV show called *Judge Capper* – a boot camp for recovering drug addicts – and he hopes to reappear on *Neighbours*, more than 30 years after his debut with Kylie Minogue.

"I'm a \$100 million brand. It's about fun, excitement and glamour," he says.

And now the self-dubbed "king of footy showbiz" is in the front passenger seat as we drive to the former VFL Park (as it was known in 1987), now the Ricoh Centre and the Hawks' headquarters.

Capper's phone rings constantly. On speaker, he does a radio interview with two giggling hosts.



STEPLADDER TO SUCCESS: Warwick Capper recreates his "Mark of the Universe" over Hawk Chris Langford in the 1987 qualifying final.



He also receives an email asking whether he'd like to compete in a celebrity version of the *Australian Ninja Warrior* TV show. It's not a good idea – Capper's knees and shoulders are shot, he gets a stiff back and can no longer run or jump.

"I'll do it!" he says. "They used to call me the white-booted warrior and now I'll be a ninja warrior."

The one-time pop singer occasionally breaks into song, crooning parodies such as *Up There Capper*, *Capper Cobana* and *There's Only One Warwick Capper*.

He says that if not for footy, he'd have been a rock star. He started learning the drums at 15 and plays in '80s cover bands.

"I was a rock star footballer anyway," he says.

"A lean, mean, excitement machine; blond-haired, blue-eyed and ready for take-off!"

There is no off-switch with Capper. He says psychological testing revealed: "High IQ, no bipolar, just hypo."

The latter becomes evident as the Ricoh Centre comes into view. Capper lifts his mobile phone and starts filming and narrating his pilgrimage for posterity.

"What's the Rich Centre?!" he asks incredulously. (Capper isn't wearing his prescription glasses, so we'll forgive the mispronunciation.)

"It should be the Warwick Capper Stadium."

THE WIZ FIZZER

● The 1987 qualifying final was Warwick Capper's last game for Sydney before joining the Brisbane Bears on an unprecedented deal.

The fledgling Bears, bankrolled by controversial businessman Christopher Skase, made a godfather offer – a three-year contract worth around \$2.3 million, which included a red Ferrari convertible, a Gold Coast clothing shop and a \$180,000 vase the Skases gave the Cappers as a wedding gift.

This was more than five times the offer from the broke Swans, who gladly accepted a record transfer fee of \$475,000.

"If it was just about footy and mates, I wouldn't have left," Capper says. "But you can't knock back the biggest contract ever. It helped set me up for life."

Capper endured three disastrous years with the Bears – but says he was "worth every cent in PR and awareness" – before returning to the Swans for one season in 1991.

"I retired at only 28. A football tragedy. But we'll always have the highlights reels."



As we walk on to Hawthorn's training ground, Capper is taken aback by the residential surrounds, which bear little semblance to the one-time concrete jungle.

"Wow, it's completely changed," he says. "But they still remember the day the Wiz rocked this joint in '87."

It is colder, windier and wetter than that career-defining afternoon, but Capper is in his element as we recreate his incredible mark over Chris Langford – which Capper reckons should be the subject of a Toyota TV ad.

"It's surreal being here again. It's been 30 years, but it feels like five. And I've hardly aged," he says.

"We should've announced we were coming – people would've come from everywhere."

Capper grew up "just down the road" in Oakleigh, where he played junior footy with another blond bombshell, David Rhys-Jones, who was a year older and became the most-reported League player in history.

"Rhys' punched heads and I sat on them," Capper says.

"I was told I wasn't good enough for League footy, but when Rhys made it (with the Swans), I knew I could – because I was better than him."

Those breathtaking marking skills were developed during speccy sessions with mates in a local park.

Capper insists he didn't always have an ungainly kicking style, explaining that a right knee injury as a teenager prompted him to use a double-handed ball drop. What he lost in distance he gained in accuracy.

"My left foot was always pretty smooth though," he says.

An early *Sliding Doors* moment came at the end of 1984 when Carlton offered the promising 21-year-old a lucrative three-year deal.

"I probably should've taken it. I might've been an even better player. What a combo me and (Stephen) 'Sticks' Kernahan would've been. And I would've won a flag," he said.

"Instead, I became the most recognised person in Sydney and single-handedly raised the profile of footy up there."

Capper's career took off when Dr Geoffrey Edelsten took over the Swans, luring gun midfielders such as Greg Williams and Gerard Healy and appointing Tom Hafey as coach for the 1986 season.

To that point, Capper had kicked 84 goals in 30 games. In two seasons under the late Hafey, he tallied 195.103 in 47 games.

Capper led the Coleman Medal race as late as round 17 in 1986 and round 15 in 1987, before finishing



I'D BE LIKE BUDDY

● If Warwick Capper played now, he'd be a better player and an even bigger personality. Just ask him.

"I was huge in the '80s, but that's nothing compared to what I'd be today," he insists.

"I was a great athlete – no one could jump like me, and I was top three at the Swans in running, so I'd handle the end-to-end running easily.

"I'd be a bit like 'Buddy', but more entertaining.

"Every mark I took was a contested mark, and today I'd get a lot of uncontested marks, too.

"With all the endorsements and footy replays, I'd be on the telly 24/7. I'd be Wiz TV."

FOOTY ROCK STAR: Capper, in familiar pose, was disappointed he never won a Coleman Medal, but settled for "good looks, fame and money".

runner-up to Collingwood's Brian Taylor (1986) and St Kilda Brownlow medallist Tony Lockett (1987).

"I wish I had a Coleman, but I settled for good looks, fame and money. 'Plugger' and 'BT' never had all of that."

Capper says Hafey was the "perfect coach" for him.

"Tommy was my biggest advocate. I was peaking and he just wanted me to jump at the ball. As long as I trained hard and kicked goals, the showmanship didn't bother him."

And there was plenty of showmanship: the long blond hair ("It was a work of art, and still is," Capper says), the tightest of shorts ("I was a size 12, but I wore size eights because having a wedgie made me jump higher"), coloured boots ("They helped me get more endorsements") and occasionally tasseled socks ("It's important to accessorise").

At the time, Healy observed that Capper was one of Australia's three best-known sportsmen, along with golfer Greg Norman and cricketer Allan Border.

"I'd go surfing with Gerard and he once said, 'The Swans team was 19 ghosts and Warwick Capper,'" Capper recalls.

"But my teammates loved Capper-mania because it took the attention and pressure off them.

"I figured I should be the face of the club – I was the best-looking player.

"Every second Sunday on TV it was the Warwick Capper Matinee."

Capper also shared his success with his teammates.

"I paid them a reward each time they passed to me and I kicked a goal. If I missed, bad luck. They made a lot of dough out of me."

Capper believes he would've kicked a ton a year earlier had it not been for his brief split with future wife Joanne. He finished with 92 goals after mustering just 13 in his last six outings.

"My head was all over the place. It cost me 20 goals," he says.

"We got back together in early '87, and life was great again.

"I really wanted 100 goals."

Capper kick-started his quest with what he rates as his greatest game, bagging 9.3 and three Brownlow votes (for the only time) in a 91-point win over Collingwood at a hostile Victoria Park.

Concerned for his spearhead's welfare, Hafey took him off minutes before the final siren.

"I was spewing. I kicked 10 against Richmond the year before and I wanted to beat that, but Tommy wanted me off because they were throwing bottles at me," Capper says.

"Mum even had to hide her Warwick Capper badge because she thought she'd get bashed. Sore losers."

Despite rough treatment from opposition fans and players alike, Capper continued his screamer-taking, goalkicking ways.

He was disappointed not to reach three figures in a final round win over Fitzroy at Princes Park when, opposed to the dashing Gary Pert, he blazed 4.4.

"I was on 99 and got a bit nervous and missed my last two shots. But it worked out better because it gave me more air time in the media."

In Capper's mind, it was a mere formality that he'd bring up his century in the qualifying final against Hawthorn. In his previous 53 games he'd been goalless just once – "and that was the week after I kicked 10, when St Kilda watered the ground and turned it into mud".

Then 24, he'd had some good duels with Langford, Victoria's full-back, and in the Swans' round seven clash with the reigning premier at the SCG, Capper had outmarked Langford and slotted the go-ahead goal, his third. "Langford did a good job, but I still won us the game," Capper says.

He adds: "Langford and (St Kilda's) Danny Frawley were the

best full-backs. Frawley was dirtier and Langford was more attacking, so you could get him on the rebound."

Capper visualised slotting his 100th goal early. Vision became premonition after just 12 minutes when he nailed a snap out of a pack.

"I thought, 'Bloody hell, what a relief!'"

The Age's Patrick Smithers suggested it was perhaps the least-celebrated century ever, given there was no ground invasion and Capper was only briefly embraced by teammate Stevie Wright.

Capper: "If it'd been at the SCG, 20,000 would've run out and they would've had to stop play for 20 minutes. But the Swans didn't have the supporters group in Melbourne like they've got now."

Ironically, it was Langford who marked the feat most notably.

"Langford had a look of horror on his face at first, but then he surprised me by shaking my hand and saying, 'Congratulations. Good effort.'"

"What a good bloke; a gentleman."

Capper was just the second Swans centurion, following the legendary Bob Pratt. They were introduced after a game.

Capper: "I said, 'I took better marks than you at training.' I said the same thing to 'Jezza' (Carlton great Alex Jesaulenko). Neither of them liked it. What a cocky bugger I was."

Capper borrows Mike Williamson's famous line about Jesaulenko when he says that each week he aimed to take at least one "CYAPPAAAAH, you beauty!"

He took just two marks in the '87 qualifying final, but the first was one of the most outrageous grabs imaginable.

Just before half-time the Swans trailed 64-31, with Capper contributing two of their four goals, when Mark Bayes kicked long to the hot spot, giving Capper the drop on Langford.

There were two freakish aspects of what happened next – that Capper went horizontal, draping himself across Langford's shoulders; and that he marked the ball one-handed, on his bicep.

"The signature Wiz move was to launch straight up and give them the old ear massage with my knees, but this was the first time I'd gone sideways," he says. "And I marked it with one hand just 'cos I could."

We asked Capper to give us his sportsmen's night spiel.

"I was laying on Langford's shoulders for so long that I fell asleep ... then I got a phone call: 'This is Air Traffic Control. Warwick Capper, can you get out of the airspace, please. There's a 747 coming!'"

He jokes he was so high his nose started bleeding. And it was,

EVER THE SHOWMAN:
"People expect 'The Wiz' to look good," says Capper, "and I haven't let them down yet."



beneath wads of cotton wool, from a childhood condition that caused regular bleeds and would later be cauterised.

Capper turned to watch the replay on the big screen. "I wanted to give myself a kiss," he says.

At the time, greats such as Lou Richards and Ron Barassi hailed it the greatest mark they'd seen.

His adrenaline pumping in the knowledge he'd produced "something no one had ever seen before", Capper then slotted his third goal.

"I was pretty excited at half-time. 'Boys, just get the ball to the Wiz.'"

In the third term, Capper injured his left hamstring while leading, but still marked and goaled before limping off his season over.

From limited opportunities, he'd kicked four of Sydney's seven goals. His season tally was 103, comprising 16 hauls of four or more.

However, the Swans went down by 99 points – then the third-worst loss in a final. Capper had provided the only highlights.

"As I sat on the bench in the last quarter, it felt weird that I'd kicked 100 goals and taken the greatest mark in 100 years, but we got destroyed."

Capper believes though that his best mark was one he snared

FACT FILE WARWICK CAPPER

Born: June 12, 1963

Recruited from:
Oakleigh Districts (Vic)

Debut:
Round 14, 1983,
v North Melbourne

Height: 190cm

Weight: 93kg

Games: 124 (Syd 90,
Bris 34)

Goals: 388 (Syd 317,
Bris 71)

Player honours:
Sydney leading
goalkicker 1984 (39),
1985 (45), 1986 (92),
1987 (103), Brisbane
Bears leading
goalkicker 1988 (45);
Mark of the Year 1987.

Brownlow Medal:
career votes 10

standing on Geelong ruckman Darren Flanigan's head in a reserves game in 1982.

His grab over Langford wasn't eligible for the Mark of the Year because it was taken in the finals, but Capper won the competition anyway (for the only time) for a skyscraping effort against North Melbourne.

"The ABC had the TV rights that year, so I didn't even win a car. I should've won about six of them and opened my own car yard."


Capper, who had a 0-3 finals record, spares a thought for Langford.

"I feel a bit sorry for Chris," he says. "He starred in premierships and he became an AFL Commissioner, but every week for the past 30 years someone has reminded him that he was Wiz Capper's stepladder."

"The photo of that mark was on back pages of newspapers and it was on billboards, and I've sold thousands of them. It's bought me a couple of houses."

"It had a huge effect on people. A guy showed me a tattoo of the mark on his leg."

"It was a legendary moment, but we can't forget Langford."

"The mark wouldn't have happened if he'd collapsed under my rippling physique." 

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