



ILLUSTRATION: GUY SHIELD/SLATTERY MEDIA GROUP

David Dunbar has built a reputation as one of the AFL's most cunning club spies, a group that does "whatever it takes" to discover information about the opposition. **BEN COLLINS**

He has been forcibly removed from training venues, publicly condemned by clubs for his methods, and has even been threatened with violence, but it will take a lot more than that to deter the AFL's most audacious spy, David Dunbar.

In just his second season working for Melbourne, Dunbar has made quite an impact with

his intrepid approach.

In fact, he has become a subject of near obsession for opposition clubs desperate to protect sensitive information relating to game-plans, tactics, team structures, injuries, etc. The fixation has also extended to media outlets just as desperate to pin down the man described as the "most despised" spy in AFL circles.

In turn, Dunbar has become increasingly protective of his

own identity and methods. In fact, until a week ago, he (and the Demons) had flatly rejected all media requests for interviews. Particularly after tales of his run-ins with Hawthorn and the Western Bulldogs (to name but two) became news items.

But for someone who has become a media recluse, Dunbar has had his share of exposure.

He coached VFL club Port Melbourne from 2000-03, guiding the Borough to a Grand Final and preliminary final, and in a particularly hectic 12-month period, was drawn into three media circuses.

He coached both Tony Lockett

and Jason McCartney as they made their respective comebacks to the AFL through the VFL, and his skipper and assistant coach Peter Filandia was suspended for 10 matches for biting. (Lockett made a short-lived AFL comeback via the VFL when the Sydney Swans had an alignment with Port; McCartney was returning via Port after suffering life-threatening burns in the Bali terrorist attacks of 2002.)

Of the Filandia experience, Dunbar says: "The media was hovering. We had to shut people out, and we lied to the media about training times to keep things under wraps." Ironical that, »

considering what some clubs do now to keep Dunbar out.

More recently, Dunbar also coached WAFL club East Fremantle and had 14 youngsters drafted or rookie-listed in his three years (2005-07), among them Paddy Ryder, Rhys Palmer, Harry Taylor and Mitch Clark.

Dunbar is full of surprises. The first was that he actually agreed to meet the *AFL Record* for a light-hearted interrogation; and, over the course of a two-hour interview (another surprise), he continued to shock, and amuse, with his frank insights into the little-known world of club reconnaissance work. Think 'Spy vs Spy', or *Catch Me If You Can*, or even Inspector Clouseau.

Footy spies employ a range of methods, including donning disguises and staking out training venues, while the more adventurous have been known to bribe gate attendants to access closed training sessions, climb trees and occupy building sites next to training venues.

Some of the better-resourced clubs are known to apply extreme methods, using sophisticated audio-visual technology, including hidden cameras and super-sensitive listening devices.

But, ultimately, footy spies are all driven by the same goal: to gain important information that helps their clubs win. And they'll do it any way they can.

This is an insight into their unique world.

It's a fresh afternoon when the *AFL Record* meets Dunbar at the Junction Oval (the inner-city headquarters of Melbourne's football department). He is happy to advertise his loyalties today, warding off the cold in a Demons tracksuit.

Now middle-aged, he sounds like – and perhaps even resembles – Australian actor Steve Bisley.

At Dunbar's suggestion, we wander through parkland towards a café in nearby Fitzroy Street. As we stroll, it's obvious his injury-plagued playing days are catching up with him.

Dunbar played 100 VFA



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DAVID DUNBAR ON WHAT OTHERS THINK

games for Frankston and Port Melbourne from 1979-90. A hard-nosed on-baller, he admits he “lacked a yard” and “didn’t hit the honour boards too much”. Thick-boned and strong-bodied, the old warhorse is more like a Clydesdale these days.

Also gone is the mullet he once proudly wore like a mane. “She bit the dust a while ago, mate,” he says, equally flattered and embarrassed that someone recalls him in his prime.

His preferred café is too busy for his liking, so we move to another quieter establishment a few doors down.

Dunbar (‘Dave’ to most who know him) has barely touched his skinny latte when his mobile phone rings. A radio station wants to interview him. (Newspapers and television stations have also been, as he says, “on my case.”) Dunbar hardly speaks, and quickly ends the conversation.

He isn’t overly enthusiastic about the reviews he has received in the press, which have served to make him the AFL’s highest-profile undercover snoop.

In the absence of first-hand accounts from Dunbar himself,

the *Herald Sun* recently outed him, printing a photograph of him.

“Yeah, that worried me a bit,” Dunbar says. But not nearly as much as the accompanying story that described him as “the most despised man in the AFL’s spying game” because he was “the most daring”.

Dunbar doesn’t mind the “daring” bit, adding: “Now they could probably use the term ‘the most exposed’ because I obviously need better hiding spots!”

However, he contests the use of the word “despised”. Although it’s clearly a back-handed compliment, he explains: “You’d like it phrased a bit better than that. I’m just trying to do my job to the best of my ability, and that’s gather information for Melbourne. My loyalty lies solely with them.”

Dunbar’s official title at Melbourne is ‘innovations coach’, which appears a disguise in itself. He can just as easily be termed a forward scout, an opposition analyst – or a spy.

“It’s a nice title,” he says with a laugh, before explaining that his job does actually require him to be innovative, and not just with his choice of hiding places.

In addition to revealing how to negate opposition strengths and exploit their weaknesses, part of his brief is to keep an eye on the competition in general to identify trends and methods.

Although Dunbar expends much time and effort watching other teams train and play, his busiest day is Monday. That’s when he assembles a thick dossier that he circulates among the Demons’ coaches, before translating it into a PowerPoint presentation to show the coaches on Tuesday and the players on Wednesday. He revels in this “coaching element” of the job.

Dunbar’s first spying assignment was for Hawthorn in 1997 (after four years as Port Melbourne reserves coach). Then, he was merely required to supply a written report on the Monday of each round, with little interaction with coaches and no direct involvement with players.

“But,” he says, “it was easier to hide in those days.”

Dunbar owes much to Hawthorn. It was there he

met Ken Judge (then Hawks coach who helped him get the East Fremantle job), and then assistant coach Chris Connolly, who became an important ally.

In 2004, when Dunbar was between stints in the VFL and WAFL, he did a variety of roles for the Connolly-coached Fremantle.

Connolly, now the Demons’ general manager of football, also recommended Dunbar for the innovations coaching job at the end of 2007.

Dunbar’s mentor in covert operations is Demons recruiting officer Gary Burleigh, who was a scout for Fremantle for seven years.

“Burls’ had some great tricks,” Dunbar says. “He’s the master, I’m the pupil – and I’m studying harder than I ever did at Bonbeach High (in Melbourne’s peninsula area)!”

Dunbar needs to be at his most innovative when infiltrating the enemy. “The measures you have to take to stay on top of your job are pretty intense and in-depth,” he explains.

Such ‘measures’ have enraged some clubs.

Most notably, before last year’s opening-round match against Hawthorn, Dunbar took up an elevated position on a construction site overlooking the Hawks’ training base at Waverley.

Wearing construction gear, complete with a hard-hat, he mounted a video-camera on a tripod to make it look like he was using surveying equipment.

When the Hawks discovered him, they – particularly coach Alastair Clarkson (himself a former Melbourne player) – were incensed. But he has been back, and makes no apologies.

Asked to elaborate on the construction site episode, Dunbar says: “I don’t really need to say anything – it’s out there. Just let it ride, mate.”

Dunbar understands Clarkson being so protective because he was working on the ‘cluster’ structure the Hawks used so well last year.

But Dunbar jokes: “I think ‘Clarko’ bears a grudge because when I was coaching Port Melbourne and he was coaching Werribee, we beat them by 20 goals.”

The Bulldogs found Dunbar a nuisance too when they caught ➤

him peering at a closed training session at Whitten Oval while standing on a footbridge on the Gordon Street off-ramp from Geelong Road.

Dunbar dismisses a so-called 'gentlemen's agreement' that suggests spies must leave closed sessions once discovered.

"Clubs have been spying on each other for a hundred years, and everyone's doing it," he says. "Until the AFL comes out with a doctrine that says 'Thou shall not spy,' it's open slather. Our theme is: 'Whatever it takes'."

He finds it amusing that one club that has publicly complained about him, actually sought his advice on how their spy might conceal himself at a particular lockout session. "If it's good for the goose, it's good for the gander," he says.

After all, Dunbar has become such a master of concealment that clubs patrol their perimeters looking specifically for him, with a mate from a rival club claiming he has circulated photos of Dunbar to such search parties.

Some clubs have been known to change their training times and player guernsey numbers to stifle Dunbar's efforts.

Officials at one club were so paranoid that they searched a social club luncheon to ensure he wasn't disguised as a waiter.

On another occasion, Dunbar heard club officials looking for him as he watched training through a small slit in a cramped, enclosed space. "The sniffer dogs were out for me," he says jokingly, "but they didn't pick up my scent."

One spy recently made the mistake of turning up to a



training session wearing his club's tracksuit. "At least I've never been silly enough to do that!" Dunbar says.

That may be so, but rumour has it Dunbar's wardrobe contains supporter gear of most AFL clubs to help him meld into the background. Dunbar giggles at this suggestion: "Never ruin a good story with the facts."

He could answer many questions exactly the same way, but thankfully doesn't.

"You've got to get in amongst it," he says, "and to do that you've got to become one of them, even if it means wearing enemy colours."

I just scurried off into the bushes and climbed up another tree undetected and found out (Stephen) Milne wasn't playing. So it was worth the effort

DAVID DUNBAR ON THE HAZARDS OF THE JOB

"What can I say? I'm a big supporter of the AFL – I've got a decent bill for clothing supplies!"

He also could have had a decent medical bill. While doing some "reconnaissance work" at one ground last year, he tried to exit through an old turnstile and got stuck.

"I was like a rat in a trap," he says. "I managed to squeeze through the turnstile, but I took half my chest off in the process."

Dunbar hotly disputes a story doing the rounds that he suffered a bruised or broken coccyx after falling five metres from a tree, after being caught staking out a closed St Kilda training session at Moorabbin before round 10.

He is adamant that after initially trying to explain he was merely "looking at birds", he simply "surfed" a breaking branch "half a metre" to the ground and landed on his feet "like a cat".

He adds: "Then I just scurried off into the bushes and climbed up another tree undetected and found out (Stephen) Milne wasn't playing. So it was worth the effort."

Another club ejected him from a lockout session and then even tried to manhandle him away from a viewing position on the side of a major road, despite

it being a public place.

Dunbar told the club heavy: "You might have kicked me out, but I've still managed to get two other blokes in there."

Asked if he was bluffing – and if he purposely acts as a decoy while his foot soldiers do his dirty work – Dunbar says:

"I can't say. I don't want to blow too much cover!"

However, he concedes that one of his greatest challenges is doing his job when most clubs know him by sight. "Mate, I just have to live up to the job title a bit more – be more innovative," he says, chuckling.

Another challenge is viewing training through binoculars from long distances, or with only a partial view. "But there are ways around that," he says.

Like what? "Sorry, mate, I'm not prepared to divulge that."

He says one way of alleviating the issue of distance is having an intimate knowledge of every player in the AFL, including "their mannerisms, the way they run and kick".

Some wealthy clubs are believed to have spywear that enables them to do extraordinary investigative work.

Dunbar marvels: "Apparently they can listen to a coach talking to a player in the middle of the ground. It sounds far-fetched, but I'd love to be on the cutting edge of that technology."

He'd also love to play a role in the Demons' projected rise. "People might say: 'You're on the bottom of the ladder; why bother spying?' Because we go out there 100 per cent to win every week. Melbourne is an exciting place to be – we're on the rise." ☺



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Western Bulldogs
Richmond
Hawthorn
Adelaide
Essendon
Sydney Swans
Geelong Cats

LEHMO

St Kilda
Western Bulldogs
Richmond
Hawthorn
Adelaide
Essendon
Sydney Swans
Geelong Cats

DAVE

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Western Bulldogs
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