



**TOUGH WAY TO THE TOP:** John Bingley's life has been a mix of emotions – the former Saint is confined to a wheelchair but is a successful businessman.



PHOTO: MATT ROBERTS/AFL PHOTOS

# J O H N B I N G L E Y



In his eighth and final League game, John Bingley became a St Kilda premiership hero – the man who stopped Collingwood champion Des Tuddenham. Fifty years on, the Tasmanian great tells **BEN COLLINS** about his eventful, and successful, life on and off the field – one in which he has overcome great hardship.

**J**ohn Bingley has never been confined to his wheelchair. Nor anything else.

Approaching his 75th birthday, Bingley is technically an elderly man with a disability.

Just don't tell him he can't do something.

The irrepressible spirit that was so evident in Bingley the footballer – most notably when he subdued Collingwood star Des Tuddenham to help St Kilda to the 1966 flag – remains a dominant part of his being.

The old Saint faced various obstacles in football, but the way he has attacked life while adapting to his health issues is more inspirational than any of his on-field heroics.

Bingley first realised something was wrong in 1981 when, as coach of New Norfolk in his native Tasmania, he kept stubbing his right foot as he ran.

He sought medical opinion and scans revealed a marble-sized tumour – which was benign but growing – inside his spinal cord in the middle of his back.

“If I hadn't created this life for myself, I don't think I'd be here. It hasn't been easy”

JOHN BINGLEY

His final act as a coach was to lead New Norfolk in the Tasmanian Football League Grand Final, which it lost, before undergoing high-risk surgery.

“I was happy with the job the surgeon did, but in those days they'd cut through everything to get to the tumour, whereas these days they probably wouldn't have to and I might be able to ...,” Bingley said, pausing momentarily.

“Look, I don't like thinking about it. Can't do anything about it anyway. You just do the best with what you've got.”

Initially, Bingley was a part-time wheelchair user, but his condition gradually worsened to partial paraplegia. About 10 years ago, he became permanently attached to what he calls “the chair”.

Bingley can still “give someone a kick up the backside” with his left leg, but his once-dominant right leg isn't as mobile.

However, he can still drive a car, using hand controls. His number plate reads ‘StK 66’.

In other ways, Bingley has become more upwardly mobile.

For all his football achievements in Melbourne and Tasmania, he is perhaps proudest of his efforts in business.

Bingley had vowed not to let his disability “beat” him and, in 1991, he started Licensing Essentials (LE), a “one-stop specialist for licensed merchandise” with brands including the AFL (and all 18 clubs), Cricket Australia, National Rugby League, the Socceroos, rock band AC/DC, Warner Bros, Star Wars and cable TV sensation *Game Of Thrones*.

Bingley's three sons (Michael, Scott and Darren) have been heavily involved in the company, which boasts an annual turnover of \$50 million.

Bingley, who lives alone in Melbourne's east, also owns houses in Tasmania and on the Gold Coast and takes annual overseas holidays.

“If I hadn't created this life for myself, I don't think I'd be here,” Bingley said. “It hasn't been easy.”

Neither was his footy career – an eventful eight-game, three-season stint with the Saints bookended by successful stints in Tasmania.



Bingley, who also played representative basketball in Tasmania, grew up in Launceston.

"As a kid, I couldn't give a continental about school," he said. "All I was interested in, and all I ever did with my mates, was play football. Even in summer."

His father, John Bingley snr, had been a trainer at local Northern Tasmanian Football Association club City South, so John junior tagged along and started in the thirds (under-19s).

In early 1958, when Bingley was 16, South Melbourne invited him to play an intra-club practice match. The "skinny runt" bowled over a much bigger opponent to win a hard ball.

"Everyone roared," Bingley recalled. "It was quite funny. Not particularly for him though."

Bingley didn't hear from the Swans for several days, so he returned to Tassie.

"History shows that was a smart move," he said.

Bingley returned to City South, where he spent the next four seasons, winning two NTFA premierships, a state premiership, *The Examiner* Trophy (which was stolen soon after) and a spot in the club's Team of the Century.

He also played on superstar Darrel 'Mr Magic' Baldock in a

“I took a while to make up my mind – that’s how I got such a good contract”

**BINGLEY**

**FIERCE CONTEST:** Bingley (left) fights for the ball in the 1966 Grand Final while keeping Magpie star Des Tuddenham (second from right) in check.

representative game, receiving a best player award in a winning team.

"I don't know why, but the best players brought out the best in me," he said, later expressing pride in his efforts to quell superstar spearheads Neil Hawke (South Australia) and Austin Robertson (Western Australia) on a 1963 trip with the Tasmanian team.

In the early '60s, Bingley received a visit from two of the biggest figures in the game: Melbourne coach Norm Smith and captain Ron Barassi, who wanted him to become a Demon.

Bingley "couldn't have been more flattered", but wouldn't budge; he was happy at home.

A self-confessed "average guy with an average job" who worked in a post office mail room and received less than £3 (\$6) a game at City South, Bingley transferred to North West Football Union club East Devonport (Baldock's original club) in 1962 for £25 (\$50) a game and an £18 (\$36) a week job.

He made a big impact, winning the best and fairest first up and the League award the next year (as a centre half-forward) and earned a reputation as a tough customer.

As the national anthem was played before an inter-league game, ex-Richmond player Graeme Wilkinson niggled Bingley, who dropped him on the spot.

"Wilky' and I have been good mates for years – that was just a little hiccup," he said.

Bingley was courted by strong TFL club Glenorchy and in 1964, at just 22, became one of the youngest men to be appointed a state league captain-coach.

Then the Saints marched in.

St Kilda captain Baldock and secretary Ian Drake, who was City South's secretary when Bingley was a junior, made a few trips across Bass Strait to convince the defender to join them.

Others told Bingley, "If you don't go now, you'll regret it forever."

The money was also too good to refuse.

"I took a while to make up my mind – that's how I got such a good contract," he said.

"I wasn't allowed to tell anyone how much I was on. I was on more money than 60-70 per cent of the players.

"I also got a rent-free house that the club owned and a Volkswagen."

The recruit impressed immediately, stifling Baldock in an intra-club practice match.

"Doc' wasn't going flat out but I was, because I was playing for my football life," Bingley says.

"I backhanded him, bumped him and upended him when I could. Afterwards, Doc shook my hand and said 'well done' but I don't think he was too happy with me."

Initially, Bingley got his money for nothing. He was forced to sit out the 1964 season after the TFL – influenced by bitter Glenorchy officials, Bingley believes – repeatedly refused to clear him.

Bingley takes up the story of how he learned of the dispute.

"I was getting changed for my first game when 'Drakey' came in and said, 'Bing', I need to see you right now."

"We went into another room and he said, 'You're not playing today, mate.'

"I thought I'd been dropped. I said, 'Why?'"

"He explained that the TFL had originally cleared me by accident – on the form, they'd crossed out the word 'REFUSES' instead of 'GRANTS'; and they'd since sent another letter cancelling the clearance.

"But Drakey assured me, 'Don't worry, we'll get you playing next week.' Yeah, right – it turned into next year!"

Drake raged to reporters that Bingley was the only Tasmanian denied a transfer to the VFL that season, and a "filthy" Bingley sought legal advice.

It was all to no avail and he continued to train with the Saints

despite knowing he couldn't play a single game at any level until the next season.

But Bingley never rued his decision to join St Kilda. In fact, the clearance wrangle proved a motivating force.

However, the year off made Bingley rusty and, for the first time, susceptible to injuries and he played just three League games in 1965.

The 1966 season was shaping as another personal tale of woe as various ailments made it tough for Bingley to break into a strong Saints side.

Little wonder he regards himself as "very bloody lucky" to be part of the euphoria that followed.

Again, Bingley played just three home and away games in the seniors, the last in round 13. But he was fortunate to have the chance to press his senior claims in a reserves semi-final and he performed strongly in a losing side.

Then an opportunity presented itself. In the senior second semi-final the next week, St Kilda went down to Collingwood by 10 points, with Pies captain Tuddenham bagging seven of his team's 15 goals on young Saint Daryl Griffiths.

In the days before the preliminary final against reigning premier Essendon, coach Allan Jeans took Bingley aside and said: "We're going to pick you, because if we make the Grand Final we want you to play on Tuddenham. Can you do it?"

Bingley replied: "Well, I won't let him kick seven."

Bingley tells the *AFL Record*: "Daryl Griffiths was a much better player than me, but he played so loose that 'Tuddy' could've kicked 10 goals."

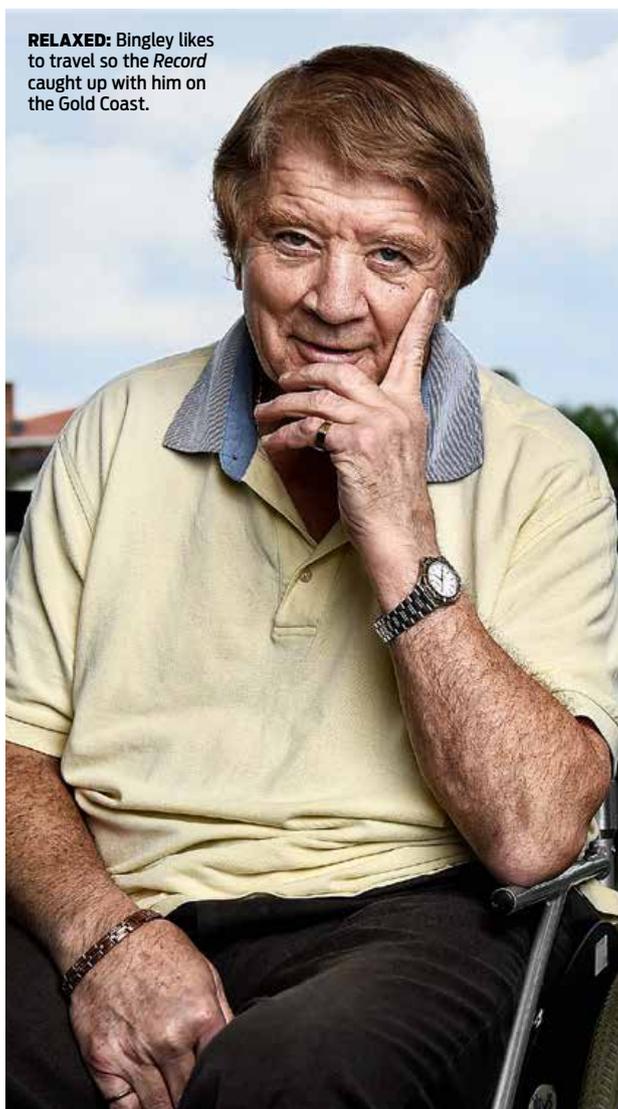
In Bingley's first final against the Bombers, he did the job on resting on-ball stars Jack Clarke and John Birt and his presence allowed Griffiths to dominate as a ruck-rover and also released other defensive options such as Verdun Howell to play more attacking roles.

Bingley faced more adversity when he copped a bad coked thigh.

But before he limped from the field, he was swung forward and kicked the only goal of his League career. It was a beauty too – "a left-foot hook across the body that bounced through".

*The Age* reported Bingley was restricted to light jogging on the Tuesday night before the Grand Final but, unbeknown to most, he rode a pushbike for an hour each morning

**RELAXED:** Bingley likes to travel so the *Record* caught up with him on the Gold Coast.



“As much as I was under pressure to stop him, he was under more pressure than me to kick another bag

**JOHN BINGLEY ON DES TUDDENHAM**

(from 3am) and night to loosen the knot in his thigh.

"They didn't think I'd make it," he said.

The gruelling fitness test on the Thursday night was one of the toughest challenges of Bingley's career.

Jeans worked him so hard that Bingley "felt like decking the coach".

About a dozen times, he was paired off against a fresh player in fierce one-on-one contests.

Bingley looked at Jeans and thought, 'If you tell me to do that again, I'll tell you where to go.'

"I think 'Jeansy' knew, because he said, 'Righto, that's it. Do a lap and in you go,'" he said.

"I didn't think I could do that lap, but thankfully Jeansy said, 'You, Bingley, go straight in.'

"I went straight in all right – straight to the toilets and was sick for about half-an-hour."

Bingley also became sick with worry about whether he had done enough to convince the selectors.

He was having a sleepless night when, around midnight, there was a knock at his front door. It was secretary Drake, who announced,

"Binga, you're in the side, and you're on Tuddenham."

Drake also gave him a sleeping tablet, which had the desired effect.

Bingley slept "OK" the next night but on Grand Final morning he felt tense and tired.

"But that soon disappeared because the adrenaline took over. My leg felt fine too," he said.

Amazingly, given the importance of Bingley's assignment in the Saints' quest for their first premiership, Jeans didn't give him any pre-game instructions. The coach just nodded at Bingley with a typically grave expression.

Battle lines were drawn before the first bounce.

"Tuddy strutted over to me with this smug look on his face, like he was the king and I was nothing," Bingley recalled. "So when he went to shake hands, I knocked his hand away and told him where to go."

The equally tough Tuddenham told the *Record* he thought it was merely a Jeans ploy to upset him. "But that stuff never worried me," he said.

The scene was set for an explosive confrontation.

The Pies skipper had been refused his wish to tag champion centreman Ian Stewart, who had just become a dual Brownlow medallist, so Tuddenham tried to run through him instead – and just failed.

Bingley: "I told Tuddy, 'If you try that again, I'll kick ya' head in – and I don't care if they put me out for a year!'"

Apart from "a few threats, a push-'n'-shove and the odd one in the guts", their duel never erupted.

"It was more about playing Tuddy close and staying on his inside so he couldn't break through centre half-forward," Bingley said.

"But as much as I was under pressure to stop him, he was under more pressure than me to kick another bag."

In that classic Grand Final, Tuddenham kicked three goals – two of them on Bingley – and assisted in two others.

Bingley had a hand in a goal himself. One of his eight kicks, a high punt to centre half-forward, resulted in a major that put the Saints 10 points clear early in the last quarter.

"That was a big thing for me," Bingley said. "I thought, 'Great – at least I've done something positive, rather than being negative all game.'"

Around that time, Tuddenham was moved on to the ball and soon became so influential that Bingley sent a message to Jeans: "Is someone going to pick up Tuddenham or do you want me to do it?"

No change was made and it could easily have proved costly. In fact,





Bingley felt the Pies should have shifted Tuddenham into the middle immediately after half-time.

When the final siren signalled a one-point St Kilda victory, Bingley felt "excitement that just stays in you".

Old Sainters still feel indebted to Bingley, but he's perplexed by that.

"I did all right at negating Tuddenham, but I didn't do anything great," he said.

Tuddenham rued some missed chances, but conceded Bingley "did his job".

Bingley revealed the most humbling endorsement came from Jeans, who died in 2011.

"After the game, Jeansy looked me in the eyes, shook my hand, put his arms around me, looked at me again, shook my hand again, looked at me once more, then patted me on the back and walked away," Bingley said.

"Once again, he didn't say a single word, but by his actions he'd said so much. I knew exactly what he meant – and it meant more to me than anything. Even more so now that Jeansy's no longer with us."

The Tuddenham/Bingley clash spawned a surprising postscript.

After the siren, Bingley had offered his hand to Tuddenham, who responded in kind, telling Bingley where to go.

This curt exchange was later repeated as they walked to the after-match function. They didn't meet again for more than a decade.

In between times, Tuddenham achieved greatness despite not

winning a premiership, while Bingley became a legend in Tasmania.

A fortnight after becoming a St Kilda immortal, Bingley returned to Tasmania for family reasons.

He then accepted a godfather offer to captain-coach TFL club Clarence for an astounding \$30,000 a season, provided by a wealthy local benefactor.

"It was the biggest contract they'd heard of – and I wouldn't let them say a word about it," he said.

Clarence made the finals in each of Bingley's six seasons there, contesting three consecutive Grand Finals and winning the club's first premiership in 1970 – a triumph he rates as a bigger personal achievement than the St Kilda one.

Clarence's flag (against Glenorchy) was celebrated harder, and the local council even named a street after Bingley.

"Boy, have I had some photos taken with people under that street sign," he says.

That Clarence team was this year inducted into the Tasmanian Football Hall of Fame. (Bingley had previously been inducted as both a player and as part of City South's 1960 team.)

Earlier in that 1970 season, when Tasmania upset 'Polly' Farmer's Western Australia, Baldock had passed to Bingley for the winning goal.

For some time, Bingley had been thinking about making peace with Tuddenham.

**FACT FILE**
**JOHN BINGLEY**

**Born:** November 10, 1941

**Recruited from:**

East Devonport

**Career:** City South

1958-61: 101 games;

East Devonport

1962-63: 42 games;

St Kilda 1964-66:

8 games (2 finals),

1 goal; Clarence

1967-72: 128 games

**Player honours:**

Tasmanian Football

Hall of Fame; Clarence

Team of Champions

(centre half-back);

City South Team

of the Century

(half-back flank);

Wander Medal

(NWFU best and

fairest) 1963; East

Devonport best

and fairest 1962;

St Kilda premiership

side 1966; Clarence

(TFL) premiership

side (captain-coach)

1970; City South

(NTFA) premierships

1959, 1960; City

South state

premiership,

1960; Clarence

captain-coach

1967-72; Tasmania

(5 games); New

Norfolk coach 1981.

**ULTIMATE PRIZE:** Darrel Baldock holds the premiership cup while teammates including Bingley (second from right) lap it up.

In the late 1970s, they were tricked into it by a mutual mate.

Melbourne's late great 'Big Bob' Johnson invited both men to his house, telling them separately that he wanted them to meet someone.

"When I got to Big Bob's place, the bugger introduced me to bloody Des Tuddenham," Bingley recalled.

"For a moment I thought, 'What's Des going to do?' But we finally shook hands without either of us knocking the other's hand away. It had been a bloody long time coming!

"I told him I was rapt we were doing it and he said he felt the same way. We laughed about it and found we actually enjoyed each other's company.

"We've become friends, so it was terrific by Big Bob."

Tuddenham agrees: "John's a ripper bloke, he's overcome a lot of adversity and I'm proud of him."

Tuddenham jokes that he "made a nobody from Tassie famous"; that Bingley "didn't know whether it was a Sherrin or Ross Faulkner because he didn't touch it"; and that if he had played only eight League games he'd be "too embarrassed to tell anyone".

To it all, Bingley has the ultimate comeback: "Where's your cup? We've got ours."

"He's got me there," a wry Tuddenham said. 🍷

🐦 @bencollcollins