

# The BOY FROM THE GRAMMAR

Sam Newman

Fifty years ago this round, John Noel William 'Sam' Newman made his debut for Geelong against Fitzroy at Brunswick Street Oval – an event that kick-started a distinguished 18-season career that led to a wildly successful, and controversial, media career. He returns to the scene to chat about that day in 1964. **BEN COLLINS**

PHOTO: MICHAEL WILLSON/AFL PHOTOS

“ I’VE NEVER PLANNED A DAY IN MY LIFE ”



# Sam Newman

**T**he deep, rhythmic purr of a white 1967 Ford Mustang announces the arrival of Sam Newman. The *Record* has arranged to meet Newman at Fitzroy's old home ground, the Brunswick Street Oval, where he made his debut for Geelong 50 years ago.

Despite the Tuesday morning peak-hour traffic, Newman is on time, easing the throbbing Mustang into a parking space behind the old grandstand.

The 68-year-old drives the classic muscle car daily. It was still three years in the making when Newman played his first game, but he reckons its presence adds further authenticity to this golden-anniversary exercise.

With typical, straight-faced self-deprecation, he proclaims the Mustang is "old and stuffed, like me".

They may be old, but neither appears "stuffed".

Newman is dressed in his standard *Street Talk* attire (that is, when he's not wearing an outrageous outfit): a polo shirt, shorts and casual slip-on shoes. (He's scheduled to film *Street Talk* for *The Footy Show* later this morning.)

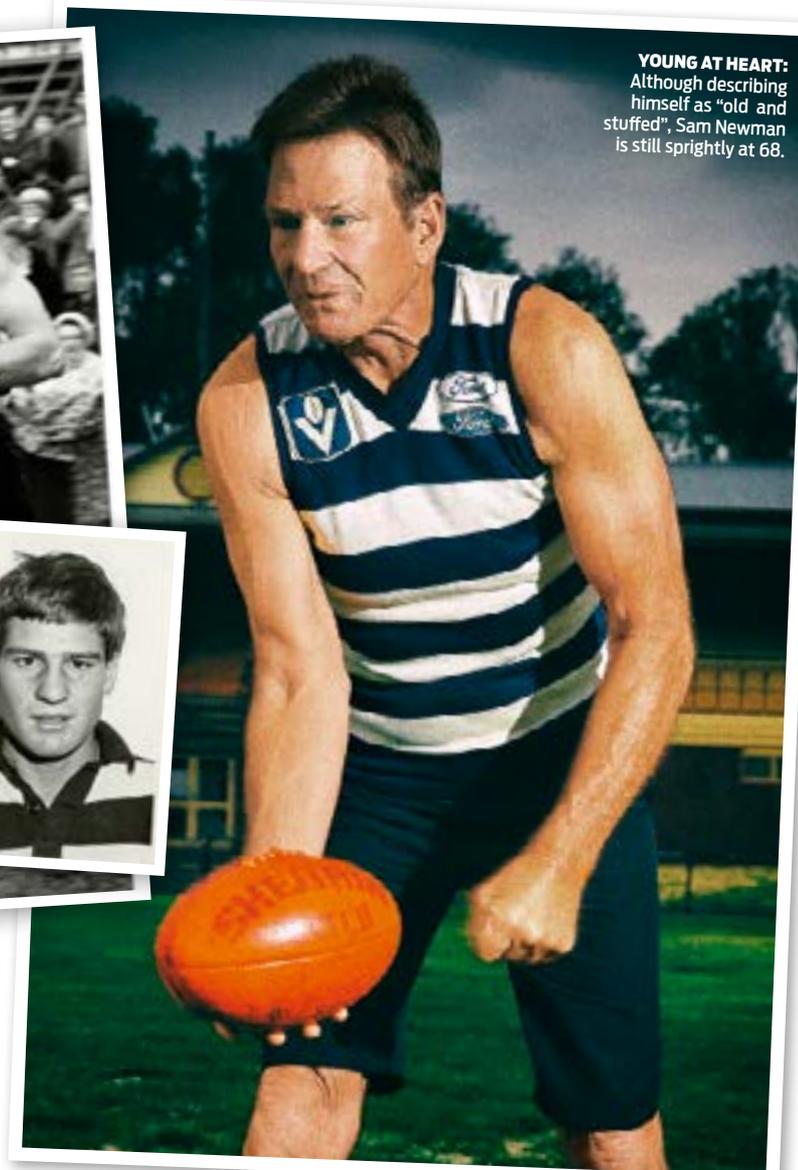
Although born just months after the official end of World War II, and although in recent years his colleagues have taken to calling him 'Fossil' ('Foss' for short), and despite battling numerous injuries in his 300 games, and that much-discussed and altered face aside, the old warrior looks great for his age.

Remarkably for a big bloke, Newman still hovers around his old playing weight in the mid-90kg range and, with our encouragement, still fits into his old No. 17 jumper and still handballs with power and precision with either hand over 10 metres. He just can't kick on his previously dominant right foot, multiple ankle operations taking their toll.

Given Newman's profile as the star of *The Footy Show* for the past 21 years, it is often overlooked that he was a champion footballer. Not that it bothers him – he rarely reflects on his playing days in any detail and can't see why anyone would be interested in hearing about it.

Which is why this meeting, in which he has agreed to humour us, is a rare treat.

The old Lions' lair is a throwback to a time when League football was a more intimate, suburban affair. Surveying the picturesque oval and surrounds from the grandstand, with the Melbourne skyline a prominent backdrop to old Fitzroy



**YOUNG AT HEART:** Although describing himself as "old and stuffed", Sam Newman is still sprightly at 68.

## FACT FILE

# 17

**Born:** December 22, 1945

**Recruited from:** Geelong Grammar

**Debut:** Round 3, 1964 v Fitzroy

**Last game:** Semi-final, 1980 v Richmond

**Height:** 189cm

**Weight:** 94kg

**Games:** 300

**Goals:** 110

**Honours:** best and fairest 1968, 1975; 2nd best and fairest 1974; 3rd best and fairest 1965, 1970, 1976; Australian Football Hall of Fame; Geelong Team of the Century; All-Australian 1969; Victoria (8 games); captain 1974-75.

**Brownlow Medal:** career votes 100

North terrace houses, Newman observes: "The trees are a bit taller and so are the city buildings – they weren't there in '64. And I've probably shrunk a bit."

Newman's path to League football was relatively rapid – the kind generally reserved for greats.

A junior long jump and hurdles champion, Newman dreamed of playing for Geelong alongside his hero Graham 'Polly' Farmer – a dream that was sealed when Cats coach Bob Davis watched the youngster bag 18 goals from centre half-forward for Geelong Grammar midway through 1963.

Davis gave the 17-year-old one of Farmer's training jumpers as an incentive to play the last three reserves games to qualify for the finals, but Newman didn't need any encouragement. He slotted two goals as a ruck-rover in a seconds premiership side, in the curtain-raiser to the senior Grand Final, also won by Geelong.

Newman's parents wanted him to study law, but he took a job as a bank teller just to get to Cats training on time. The commitment paid off in round three, 1964, when he was selected on the bench in the senior team against Fitzroy.

There was another debutant for Geelong that day – 20-year-old back pocket Kevin Kirkpatrick, who played his second and final League game the following week. Newman can't place Kirkpatrick but explains: "I can't remember most of the people I've met over the journey."

Kirkpatrick, now a 70-year-old grandfather living at Tura Beach on New South Wales' south coast, can't remember making his debut with Newman either.

However, he recalls his first kick coming via an overtly generous handball from Farmer and believes Newman received similar treatment.

"He's done well for himself, hasn't he," Kirkpatrick says of Newman.

Then 18, Newman was already nicknamed 'Sam'. Before a training session, he had imitated US TV star Jackie Gleason's regular line to bandmaster Sam Spear: "A little travelling music, Sam," and Davis interjected with the rest: "And awaaay we go ... out to training Sam!"

But this day the usually jovial Davis was annoyed. The reigning premier trailed the cellar dweller by nine points at half-time after tallying 2.12, prompting an exasperated Davis to muse to his players: "I must be having a nightmare; you couldn't be playing that badly."

Although his team ran away with the game, Davis remained mildly irritated by a spectator who became increasingly vocal near the coach's box.

"Put the boy from the Grammar on! Put Newman on!" the fan repeatedly shouted.

Newman soon realised the fan pleading his case was a former schoolmate, Grant Bervin Woods (whose father Bervin Woods had a brief but controversial stint as Collingwood coach in 1950).

Newman insists he had no hand in Woods' lobbying, but suspects it was the only reason he got a brief run that day, believing Davis sent him on to the field "just to shut the bloke up".

The moment arrived in the last quarter when teammate John Sharrock suffered cramp.

As Newman recounts it, complete with a classic Davis impersonation, his coach eventually blurted: "Fair dinkum, take your dressing gown off. Put the boy from the Grammar on now. Go on Sammy, get on."

Woods voiced his approval: "About time!"

Although he lost track of Woods long ago, Newman says he still owes him a drink.

Newman is almost embarrassed that he got a run ahead of fellow benchwarmer Ian Scott – a star defender in the 1963 senior Grand Final – who sat there for the entire match.

"Talk about going from the sublime to the ridiculous," Newman says.

Scott, a 74-year-old farmer of sheep, cattle and crops in southern New South Wales, jokes that he is still "dirty" about it.

He and Newman share a family link. Well before they became teammates, Newman's uncle (his mother's brother) married Scott's aunt (his mother's sister).

## A LONG AND WINDING ROAD

► Sam Newman quips that he is "in good company" when it comes to celebrating a 50-year milestone, given **The Beatles** also emerged in 1964.

Like most teenagers of the day, Newman was swept up in 'Beatlemania' and attended one of the British foursome's concerts at West Melbourne Stadium (now Festival Hall) in June that year, little more than a month after making his League debut.

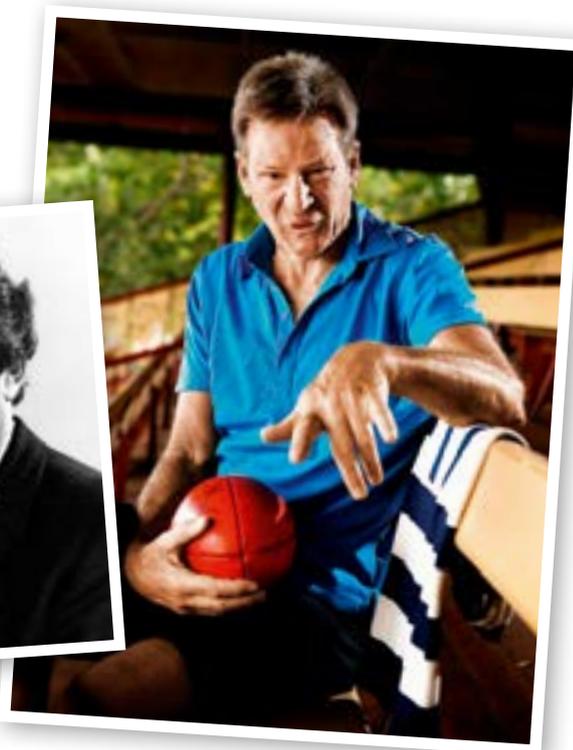
In many ways the experience was an anti-climax.

"I sat there for an hour-and-a-half and never heard a note or a word they sang, just screaming kids," he recalls.

"I don't think I was one of the screamers, but I can actually say I've seen **The Beatles** live. It's quite a thing to remember that you've seen one of the great groups in the history of the entertainment industry.

"Only a couple of them are left now, so I'm doing better than 50 per cent of them."

**FAIR DINKUM UNBELIEVABLE:** Newman does his best Bob Davis (below) impersonation.



## He's done a wonderful job for football

GEELONG TEAMMATE IAN SCOTT

"It was obvious Johnny had terrific potential," Scott says of Newman. "He had some style and he wasn't cocky, but very confident. Always a bit of a character.

"There's two sides to John: the role he's paid to play on TV, and how he is in private. He's a great guy, he's done a wonderful job for football and I'm proud of him."

Once on the field, Newman's nerves were heightened by raw fear.

Describing his youthful self as "just a mere stripling" who was "belted around a little" in his brief debut,

Newman reveals his lasting memory of the game was of contesting a centre bounce against Fitzroy strongman Russell Crow.

In painting a picture of Crow, Newman conjures an image of the sasquatch from 1987 comedy film *Harry and the Hendersons*.

"He had arms bigger than my thighs and he put the fear of the living saviour into me," Newman says.

"I suppose I owe Russell some sort of gratitude for showing me that fear is something you've got to overcome."

This theme continued a fortnight later, against Richmond at Geelong, when Newman started in the back pocket and was "momentarily hesitant" when he lined up on another hulk, Paddy Guinane.

Newman recalls Guinane resembled comic-strip boxer Joe Palooka in looks and spirit – a gentle giant off the ground, but "vicious and brutal" on it.

Newman says he endured "a very crude and rude awakening" to League football and believes most players would tell similar stories.

Not only did Newman survive, but within weeks he was hailed a future star.

So started a career that netted numerous football honours and which provided the platform for his media fame.

Newman never imagined his life evolving as it has.

"I've never planned a day in my life. I've just gone from day to day," he says. "I'm employed currently, but we're just filling in time until we get sacked. One day it will all end."

The interview ends. Donning dark sunglasses, Newman wishes us well before gently manoeuvring the Mustang out of the carpark and, with a low growl, on to a now-quiet Brunswick Street.

A little travelling music and away he goes. 📺

