



THE CURIOUS CASE OF Johnny Lewis

Rated by many as North Melbourne's finest player of his era, Johnny Lewis stood tall on the field, but had the occasional issue off it. His story is a fascinating one that has a connection to a modern-day player. ►

BEN COLLINS



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North Melbourne ruckman Johnny Lewis was the idol of many schoolboys, including the legendary Jack Dyer. Long before Dyer became Richmond royalty, he revered Lewis as “The God of Football”. In his autobiography *The Jack Dyer Story – The Legend of Captain Blood*, Dyer recalled: “One day God came to town. And he changed my life.”

It was a Sunday in the mid-1920s when Johnny Lewis visited Dyer’s hometown, Yarra Junction, east of Melbourne.

“You would have thought the Pope had arrived,” Dyer reminisced, marvelling at how Lewis attracted a mass of onlookers as he had a casual kick on the local oval.

For the awestruck Dyer, the experience crystalised his ambition. He wanted to be like the North giant – a champion admired by all.

Dyer exceeded his wildest dreams, by becoming one of the game’s greatest figures, while Lewis – also an inaugural Australian Football Hall of Fame inductee – is almost a forgotten hero.

However, Lewis did some things even the ruthless Dyer didn’t do.

During a turbulent two-year period – perhaps around the time of the Yarra Junction visit – Lewis created headlines for all the wrong reasons. In each instance, Richmond seemed to bring out the worst in the usually hard but fair Lewis, who waged an apparent one-man vendetta against the Tigers.

Lewis later conceded in *The Sporting Globe*: “I make no claims to being a saint in football.”

But he insisted there were “more big fellows sinned against than sinning”, and revealed how he dealt with an opponent who kicked him: “Somehow he struck his jaw on the point of my elbow. That cured him.”

The Lewis/Richmond hostility reached fever pitch 90 years ago this weekend when, in unique circumstances, Lewis earned a season-long suspension over two off-field incidents that took place after a game in which his team *wasn’t even involved*.

But first, you need the back story.

In 1925 – North Melbourne’s first VFL season – Lewis was suspended for three games for striking Richmond premiership defender Ernie ‘Fishy’ Taylor after a League investigation.

Then almost 24, Lewis pleaded guilty but the investigation committee accepted his defence of “extreme and repeated provocation”, which reduced his penalty.

He was defended by Reverend Daniel Daley, a North official, who described Lewis as “one of the fairest and best-tempered players in the League”.

The Shinboners star had restrained himself throughout the game at Arden St (which Richmond won) but when Taylor continued to hurl barbs at him after the teams had left the field, Lewis felt it was his “right” to defend himself.

Taylor had originally wanted Lewis charged by police, but soon cooled on the idea.



He struck his jaw on the point of my elbow. That cured him

JOHNNY LEWIS

NO SAINT: Johnny Lewis was an imposing figure (back row, fifth from left) in North Melbourne’s first VFL team in 1925 (above), and waged a one-man war against Richmond, including stars Allan Geddes and George Rudolph (below).

Two years later an explosive sequence of events added to the feud.

The North vice-captain missed the last seven games of 1927 when he took a shearing job in New South Wales. He’d stood out for the same period the previous year to work in Adelaide. (His other job titles over time included wharfie, security guard and news vendor.)

Lewis was back in Melbourne on the night of Saturday, September 10 – a week before the finals – when he attended a social function at, of all places, Richmond Football Club. (At the time he lived nearby).

At evening’s end, Tigers captain Allan Geddes – a Victorian teammate of Lewis’s the previous season – noticed his overcoat and scarf were missing.

The next morning Lewis received a visit from two policemen. He explained he’d mistakenly believed the coat belonged to his brother. The constables didn’t believe him and charged him with larceny.

The following Saturday – just four days after his 26th birthday – Lewis was the central figure in a bigger controversy.

He had a few drinks with mates at the MCG as they watched Richmond beat Carlton in a semi-final. As the Tigers left the change rooms in their civvies, Lewis struck both vice-president Harry Dyke and star big man George Rudolph.

The next night a remorseful Lewis called Dyke to apologise.

The victims refused to press charges and reportedly hoped the League would let the matter rest. This appeared a possibility when the issue wasn’t even raised at the next League meeting.

On October 6 – five days after Geddes and Rudolph were among Richmond’s best in a Grand Final loss to Collingwood – Lewis faced court for allegedly stealing Geddes’ coat.

Appearing before Judge Henry Christian Winneke (the grandfather of Hawthorn’s 1961 premiership star John Winneke, also a judge), Lewis was found not guilty.





(He was) easily the best player North has produced

**LEGENDARY TIGER JACK
DYER ON HIS BOYHOOD IDOL**

FORGOTTEN HERO:

At 191cm and 99kg, Lewis was a man-mountain for the time, being lauded as "the best follower in the League" by *The Sporting Globe* and representing Victoria 10 times.

However, his relief was short-lived. The next day Richmond lodged an official complaint with the League about Lewis's actions after the semi-final.

A fortnight later – and just a week before the killing of one-time Richmond gangster 'Squizzy' Taylor – the League found Lewis guilty of assault and misconduct, suspending him for the entire 1928 season.

And there were aftershocks.

The next year, 1928, North Melbourne made an unsuccessful complaint against a Richmond player, with evidence suggesting North attempted to "get even" with the Tigers over the Lewis episode.

And Lewis's first game as captain-coach against Richmond at Arden St in 1930 was a spiteful affair with two Shinboners suspended for a total of 18 games.

Tiger tensions might have also continued to simmer, given that in 1933 champion defender Basil McCormack copped a six-game ban for elbowing Lewis.

Of the return clash at Arden St, Dyer recalled: "I almost met my Waterloo", in the form of his boyhood hero.

When Geddes was knocked out, teenager Dyer remonstrated with the North assailant, prompting Lewis to lift Dyer off the ground by his collar and snarl: "What do you think you are going to do?"

"Nothing," Dyer moaned. "Just put me down. That's all I want."

After his season-long ban, Lewis played a further 10 seasons without incurring another suspension. He was found guilty once, for throwing the ball at an opponent.

In fact, in his entire 18-year career in the VFL and VFA, Lewis was never suspended for an on-field indiscretion.

In those tougher times, Lewis's grand reputation survived the odd angry shot of his football youth.

In 1965 – 30 years after Lewis had finished at Arden St – Dyer hailed him as "easily the best player North has produced".

The ninth-born of 11 children (five of whom died young), Lewis started with the St Michael's CYMS team in North Melbourne. He was 19 when he joined the North Melbourne club in the VFA in 1921. The raw-boned youngster made his VFA debut before returning to St Michael's and helping it to the premiership.

Perhaps he'd left due to the uncertain atmosphere at Arden St, as midway through that season North resolved to merge with League club Essendon and the Shinboners abruptly disbanded.

Former North champion Charlie Hardy – who had transferred to Essendon during merger talks – lured Lewis to Bomberland in 1922, but the reformed North Melbourne refused to clear him.

A FAMILY TRADITION

● As a boy, Daniel Venables devoured every word he could about his great-grandfather, North Melbourne champion Johnny Lewis.

Venables – West Coast's No. 13 draft pick last year – took delight in showing his mates a school library book that mentioned his famous ancestor.

"I always asked about him. It was pretty exciting knowing that your great-grandfather is in the Hall of Fame," the 18-year-old from Taylors Lakes, in Melbourne's west, told the *AFL Record*.

"From what I've read, he was fierce on the field – maybe too fierce at times because there were a couple of incidents – but they loved him as a teammate because he'd stick up for them and play the game in the right spirit."

Venables' late grandfather Fred Robinson also played for North, while his father Peter was on Collingwood's under-19s list.

"I'd love to follow the family tradition, but I also want to make my own history," said Venables, whose AFL debut has been delayed by injuries.

Lewis and his wife Catherine had a daughter Lynette, who in turn had five children, including Venables' mother Joanne.

Joanne was just nine when her grandfather died.

"Pa was just a gentle, lovely man to his grandkids – very different to what he was in football and in his work," she said.

Lewis' trophies, awards and memorabilia were destroyed in a house fire in the early 2000s and the AFL has agreed to replace the framed Australian Football Hall of Fame certificate.



This most certainly cost Lewis the chance of playing in Essendon's 1923-24 flags. As it was, he never played a final for North.

This was through no lack of inspiration from Lewis, who carried North's hopes on his broad shoulders for more than a decade.

He represented the VFA in 1923 and 1924 (as vice-captain) and was an immediate star when the Northerners joined the VFL in 1925, kicking the match-sealing goal in their first League game against eventual premier Geelong at Corio Oval.

A man-mountain for the time at 191cm and 99kg, Lewis was variously described as an "iron man", "herculean", a "lionheart" and a "warrior".

Deceptively fast, a great mark and a thumping kick, he was credited with a 79.55m roost in a 1926 game at Arden St.

Dyer, who regarded Lewis as one of his best mates on trips with Victorian teams, observed: "He was a lone man in the rucks, yet even with four top-class ruckmen, you could never be sure Lewis wouldn't beat the lot."

Lewis shared his ruck philosophy in *The Sporting Globe*: "It is an old saying that, 'beaten in the ruck, beaten elsewhere' ... so it behoves the rucks to fight to a standstill."

He was North's leading votegetter in the Brownlow Medal four times, finishing fourth overall in 1931 (when *The Sporting Globe's* Wallace 'Jumbo' Sharland lauded him as "probably the best follower in the League") and equal-fifth the next year when he was Victorian vice-captain.

In 1930 Lewis took on footy's toughest job when he became North's captain-coach and, in his only season in charge, it won just one game.

As the losses mounted, Lewis revealed: "It's tough all right, and at times it is enough to break your heart. Yet one gets philosophical ... Our turn will come some day."

His turn eventually came elsewhere.

Lewis regularly tried to change clubs – presumably to improve his finances during the Depression – but North continually refused to release him.

He wanted to coach VFA club Preston in 1931 (when the legendary Roy Cazaly was eventually appointed) and 1934.

Potential success again eluded Lewis in 1932 when he just missed out on the South Melbourne coaching job in a "toss up" with Johnny Leonard. The next year Jack Bisset guided the Swans' 'Foreign Legion' to a flag.

If not for North's blocking tactics, Lewis could have coached North



Hobart (Cazaly again filled the void) or VFA club Coburg in 1932, or played for South Melbourne or Melbourne in 1934, or coached Port Melbourne in the VFA in 1935.

It reached a crescendo while Lewis was with the Vics in Perth in June 1935, when a story circulated that he'd been dumped by North.

The news hit the 33-year-old hard. It was a difficult time – two months earlier his mother had died – and he hadn't been happy at North.

Now he had a broken nose (from a state game) and was losing sleep through stress.

The other 11 League clubs, along with some in the VFA and WAFL, joined "the rush for Lewis" before the clearance deadline.

He signed with star-studded South Melbourne after its captain-coach Bisset – a Victorian teammate – enthused they'd be premiers if Lewis held down centre half-back. Bisset also guaranteed him a good job for life.

Lewis told a reporter: "I would like to finish my career in a premiership side."

But the Shinboners vehemently denied they had discarded Lewis and the disgruntled veteran played out the season with them.

North awarded just three best and fairests during Lewis' time, and he was runner-up once – in that stormy 1935 season.

After accepting his trophy, Lewis shocked the Shinboners by declaring he was "finished with the club" and was "still good for a few more seasons". And he was right.

North finally cleared Lewis after he'd settled on Melbourne – where his boss, cartage operator Les Lambrick, was a committeeman; and where Lewis remains the club's oldest recruit at 34 years and 232 days.

Demons' coach Frank 'Checker' Hughes (Lewis' 14th League coach – a record) gave him the job of protecting his young teammates, and he excelled.

In his first game back at Arden St, North fans applauded him on to the field and his ex-teammates gave him a round of handshakes.

The popular Lewis was a key to Melbourne making the finals for the first time in eight years. Before his first final he received well-wishing telegrams from his old club.

Lewis had endured the toughest period in North's history, which included six wooden spoons, but in his first two years at Melbourne he played four finals and was among his team's best in three of them.


In 1936 Percy Taylor of *The Argus* noted: "Much of the success of Melbourne this season is due to the work of Johnny Lewis ... He is well liked by his new clubmates. He is quiet and unassuming and has a fine sense of sportsmanship."

By the time a broken arm ended Lewis' career at 36 in 1938, he had helped set the Demons on the path to their 1939-41 hat-trick.

One astute teammate, the legendary Norm Smith, proclaimed in a speech at the 1970 North Melbourne Grand Final Breakfast: "If ever there was a strong player in League football, Johnny Lewis was the strongest."

After coaching stints with Wimmera club Murtoa and West Melbourne, Lewis returned to North Melbourne in the mid-1940s as a selector – or, as he described, "just an old-timer who thinks he knows all about the game" – and coached North's thirds (under-19s) in 1948.

The next year his younger brother Bill – who had played four games with him in 1931-32 and became secretary of North's seconds team – died after an accident at just 39.

Johnny Lewis outlasted most of his 10 siblings, living to 1973, just missing North's first golden era. 

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CASE FILE

JOHNNY LEWIS

Born: September 13, 1901

Died: July 3, 1973

Recruited from: St Michael's CYMS (Vic)

Height: 191cm

Weight: 99kg

North Melbourne (VFA)

1921-24: 53 games

North Melbourne (VFL)

1925-35: 150 games, 142 goals

Melbourne 1936-38: 46 games, 18 goals

Player honours:

Australian Football Hall of Fame inductee 1996; NM 2nd best and fairest 1935; NM leading goalkicker 1931 (25), 1935 (23); captain-coach 1930;

captain 1931; Victoria (10 games, 6 goals); VFA representative 1923-24.

Brownlow Medal: career votes 57