

AT FIRST, I THOUGHT



**HAMISH
McLACHLAN**
one on one with
**JASON
McCARTNEY**

After surviving the Bali bombings, the former AFL star helps inspire kids living with burns injuries

JASON McCartney played 182 games of AFL football for Collingwood, Adelaide and finally North Melbourne. His last game was the most extraordinary. And the most unlikely. It came after a terrorist attack in Bali almost took his life, as it did many of those he was near that night.

HM: Were you a better cricketer or footballer representing Nhili?

JM: Football! I enjoyed my cricket, but football was always where I felt my talent was.

HM: Right-arm quick?

JM: We were all right-arm quicks growing up, weren't we? I tried to be really quick. It soon takes its toll on your knees and back when you're playing on the malthoid wickets!

HM: You were hugely talented, but 16 does seem a very young age to be sent to Collingwood.

JM: I laugh when I look back on it now. Having worked in that talent space for the AFL, and at club land, you're working with kids that are 16 and you can't help but reflect on the fact that that's what the draft age was. You think of Tim Watson playing out of Dimboola at 15 – it's just hard to imagine. It's a different system now, but it was a huge eye-opener leaving home in 1990 after turning 16.

HM: You arrived at a good time at Collingwood.

JM: They'd just won the premiership, and some of the most famous names in the game were there. The first day I arrived at the club would have been in early December of 1990, and you see the late great Darren Millane, Peter Daicos, Craig Kelly, Michael Christian, Mick McGuane and Gavin Brown. It was quite daunting.

HM: Particularly as an Essendon fan!

JM: A little daunting given I'd spent all of my youth barracking for Essendon, completely idolising the Essendon Football Club, and I'd been cheering for them, against the club I was now playing for, a few months beforehand!

HM: You can get unlucky. You left Collingwood for Adelaide, and in 1997 you played six games for the Crows, but didn't make the premiership team. You left, and in '98 you played in the grand final for North, after leaving the Crows, and lost to them. And then in '99, when you'd never been in better shape, you got suspended and missed the grand final win for North. It's a pretty tricky three years.

JM: It was an interesting three years, that's for sure. That's footy. You move on. And with every little setback I had along the way, the next year I'd come back and

have a better year. That premiership eluded me because in 2000 we were beaten in a prelim final by Melbourne, and I never got back to the big dance again in the playing career.

HM: After the '97 season, was it Denis Pagan who called you?

JM: He'd been in contact throughout the year. At that stage, after only playing the six games, I'd lost a lot of belief. I thought my days were numbered. When Denis showed interest, although it was flattering, he came and saw me after the grand final, which, to be honest, wasn't an ideal week for a visit!

HM: He turned up at your house?

JM: He did. I'll never forget, he walked into my place at West Lakes, and he just had this A4 sheet of paper. He handed it to me, and it just had all these points detailing what was good about me. He was the master psychologist, Denis, and he really made an impression. I'm very grateful that I took the opportunity. A one-year contract at the time, to move back to Melbourne and play under Denis at North Melbourne.

HM: You played a lot of football for North and then in 2002, life as you know it got turned upside down in Bali. Do you look at yourself as being incredibly fortunate or incredibly unfortunate?

JM: That's a great question – and one I wrestled with early on. But the answer is: overwhelmingly fortunate. Unlucky to be involved in something like that, but from the moment it happened, I feel like every step of the way, I was fortunate. I was fortunate that Mick (Martyn) was there and was able to help me get some medical attention. I was fortunate that I ended up back in Melbourne at The Alfred hospital, with great support, and very fortunate everything healed pretty well and quickly.

HM: Do you find it difficult to talk about?

JM: In the early days, I certainly did. It's easier to talk about it when it's about yourself. It would be much more difficult if it had happened to one of my sons. It was hard early, but I also felt it was unbelievably beneficial in my whole healing process, mentally and physically.

HM: To talk about it?

JM: Yeah. Being in the environment I was in, you can't be fronting up in the physical shape I was in and avoid talking about it. It was confronting for the boys, so I addressed it and it was easier to do that than not.

HM: Take us back to the night of the explosion. You were standing at the bar with Mick when it happened?



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JM: We were in Paddy's Pub. There were two levels, and we were downstairs near the bar. We'd only been there 10 or 15 minutes. Where the bomb went off, it was only about five metres from where we were standing. We were incredibly fortunate to make it out alive.

HM: Was it literally five metres from you when it exploded?

JM: Yes. The two things that will live with me forever were the sound, but also the sheer force that I was hit with from the explosion. I've never been hit like that before. It was like something you see in a movie.

HM: You thrown across the room?

JM: It knocked me completely off my

feet. Thankfully, I was able to turn my back on it, but the force threw me three or four metres across the bar.

HM: How quickly did you recognise what had happened? That it wasn't a gas bottle or something in the kitchen exploding, but a bombing?

JM: I had no idea – I just didn't contemplate terrorism.

HM: What did you think?

JM: Everything is rushing through your mind, but it feels like everything is in slow motion. There were people screaming and crying and trying to get to safety and out of the bar. My first thought was that I'd been shot. Then I thought that the boys close by in

Hawaiian shirts on a footy trip must have let off some fireworks and I'd been hit by one of those. It wasn't until the next day that we were alerted to the fact that it was an act of terrorism.

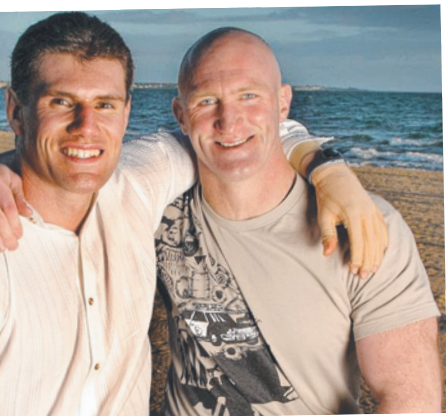
HM: It would have been terrifying chaos.

JM: Mayhem. The flash of the explosion was so bright, I was temporarily blinded too. When my vision did return – and it didn't take long, but it felt like forever – that's when I realised that the building was on fire, and worse, people were on fire. Then I looked over my left shoulder and I could see the flames roaring up the back of my shirt, and I realised I was on fire. I dropped and rolled on the ground.

WHAT I'D BEEN SHOT



(Clockwise from main) Jason McCartney; arriving at The Alfred after the Bali Bombing; with wife Nerissa; being carried off the ground after his last AFL game; with teammate Mick Martyn, who helped save him after the bombing.



JM: People were wheelbarrowing ice into a makeshift morgue out in a passageway. They would lay the bodies on the ice to stop the deterioration in the heat. It was something you can't imagine ever seeing.

HM: Did you know your life was in danger?

JM: Not initially. I thought once I was out I was safe, but then the extent of my burns and injuries became apparent. I was operated on in the early hours of Sunday morning and very quickly, because there were so many people to operate on. They did an amazing job. This was at the local hospital in Denpasar.

HM: What did they need to do?

JM: They removed as much of the burnt tissue as they could. I've learnt a lot about burns injuries now, and the issue is with infection. Unfortunately, they didn't have enough dressing to really dress the wounds. They did the best they could with the operation, but then your wounds lay open and are exposed to infection, and that is when the major issues occur.

HM: How many operations did you need in the end?

JM: I've never counted the total. I was operated on in Bali on that Sunday morning, and I flew back via Darwin and had more treatment in Darwin. When I got back to The Alfred hospital, I was instantly into surgery. I had 50 per cent burns, so a number of skin grafts, and once again, that's where I feel pretty lucky. Sometimes those grafts don't take, and you need to go back under for multiple operations. It would have been a fair length of time that I was under, but all those operations were completed in that one hit, and they were all successful. It was a bit of a miracle, really.

HM: The other part that was fortunate was that given you were an adult, you were fully grown. When you're a kid needing skin grafts, they don't stretch, and you continue to have them.

JM: That's the hardest thing for kids with burns. I was lucky, all the skin grafts took, and I had no more growing to do. For the kids, the number of operations year on year – because that skin will not stretch with the rate of growth in a child or a teenager – is horrible. I also think a lot about the disfigurement. For an adult,

you can live with that, but for a kid – you can't begin to imagine what that would be like.

HM: All of this trauma – and struggling for life – is not the ideal prep leading into your wedding?

JM: (laughs) No ... it's not. If Nerissa wanted an opportunity to get out, she had the get-out-of-jail pass!

HM: In your recovery you said, "I'm going to do two things. One, I'm going to get married in 63 days. And then, I'm going to return to football."

JM: That's right. There's no doubt the wedding gave me a focus, and everything that football had given me in terms of my skill sets – training, the mental application, mental toughness, the disciplines, and the goal setting – was a huge help.

HM: Your surgeons didn't agree with you around the timing.

JM: My surgeons, who were amazing, told me I'd have eight to 10 weeks in hospital. That wasn't going to work for me with the wedding coming up in mid-December. I took that on board, but my mindset was "I can do this and I will get there". I had a plan in place with my physio. It was tough, but doable. I just had to knuckle down and get stuck into what I could control. The only thing I could control was my rehab. I got out in about 3½ weeks.

HM: Not 10!

JM: The Alfred were fantastic – they allowed me to come back as an outpatient each day to continue with my rehab. That gave me the next four weeks to get fit and strong enough to be able to handle that wedding day. I'd lost 12kg, and I'd just started to run a little bit again. I was still pretty weak. I didn't want to just make it there, I wanted to be able to enjoy the day. I was strong in the mind. I thought, "Yes, this has happened, but for me to recover, I need to get back and do everything I was beforehand." That really helped fast-track that whole process returning to play footy again.

HM: You were long odds to play footy again, weren't you?

JM: Huge odds, especially at AFL level.

HM: What was the process?

JM: I returned to training in January – the body had done a great job of healing. The grafts had taken well. I had a really

good run right until a month or so before I got back to AFL level. I had a minor calf injury, and that was the only moment where I thought, "Maybe I can't play again".

HM: You don't seem to be a negative thinker.

JM: It was one of the rare occasions I was. I thought, "I've missed out on playing in premierships, I'm going on holidays and things like this are happening to me. I was so close to returning, and now I'm injured again. Maybe that's how it goes for me." That was my lowest point in that chunk of recovery. Thankfully, Nerissa talked some sense into me, and Anthony Stevens and Glenn Archer had a chat to me the next day.

HM: What did they say?

JM: They just put perspective on it. It's a calf injury. I got some really logical advice, hung in there, and three weeks later, I was back playing AFL. To be honest, that was when I realised that I couldn't keep going.

HM: Mentally or physically?

JM: A combination. The extent of the burns, understanding that it would take a good two years to heal properly. I was 29, and I realised there were other things that had become more important in life. Football had been huge, and continues to be so, but when you go through something like that, your family and your life beyond the playing days become more important.

HM: The McCartney game was hard to script. It was Hollywood-esque.

JM: It was remarkable how it panned out. It was a really tight game against Richmond, prime time. When I look back, rotations weren't big in AFL football then, but I spent the whole first quarter on the bench. The second and third quarters, I had limited impact, but then in that last quarter, to be able to kick a goal early, and then very late in the piece I had a hand in the goal that got us across the line to win. I thought Denis Cometti summed it up really well: it was an absolute fairy-tale ending.

HM: No one really knew that it was your last game. There was a handful of players, and the coach.

JM: I spoke with Geoff Walsh, Tim Harrington, Dani Laidley. We had a leadership meeting. We didn't talk to the

rest of the group about it, so it was only those guys that knew. We got the result, and for anyone that's interviewed on the ground after the game, the spectators never usually hear that. But I'd spoken to the club, and because it was our home game, we thought it would be good if the interview could be heard across the PA at Etihad. It was amazing scenes in the rooms afterwards.

HM: It was like a premiership.

JM: It was. We went up to the Victory Room for the after-match, and I'll never forget that for as long as I live. It was like grand final night – we couldn't fit everyone in! That was the first time I'd realised the enormity of everything. I was so focused on getting back to normality, I hadn't even given it a thought about the positive impact it could have on so many others. Through the power of sport, and the sport we love in AFL, you are able to have a positive impact on so many other people.

HM: From all of the trauma, drama, and the experience, how in any way has it helped you?

JM: You realise you are very lucky to have a second chance at life. And how precious it is. Before that happened, I was 28 years of age, fit, healthy and felt bulletproof. It sharpens your focus and perspective on life, and life past football.

HM: You must have also realised what an amazing woman you had by your side in Nerissa?

JM: I had a fair idea beforehand, but she went way above and beyond through that process. In those times in hospital, she was unwavering, day and night by my side, refusing to give up. She was such strong and critical support. It would have been harder for her. There was a period where Nerissa, Mum and Dad were told by the doctors that it wasn't looking great and it might not work out.

HM: You mentioned earlier how complicated it is to be a burns victim, but even more so as a child. The KIDS Foundation is something you and I both support for good reason. The camps they run make integrating back into the everyday a little easier.

JM: There's no doubt about that. When I reference the burns survivor camps for the kids, it's about helping with the healing process mentally and physically, by bringing a group together. You come from being in a minority at school to feeling normal again. They can share their stories with others who are going through similar challenges. It's so empowering. I really struggled with the first day at the camp. I just couldn't believe what I was seeing when people were arriving, hearing some of their stories. Some of the incidents weren't accidents. You wouldn't wish a burns injury upon your worst enemy.

HM: The camps give them back their confidence.

JM: The trauma of the disfigurement, the ongoing operations until they've stopped growing – that acceptance in the community is enormous. It breaks your heart for kids to have to go through something like that.

HM: Well said. I interviewed Mike Sheahan a few years ago and he listed his five most emotional moments in football. The McCartney game was No.1.

JM: He came and spent a day with Nerissa and I in at The Alfred during my rehab process. He is a great man. Thanks, Hame.

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