

-Pass the Pill!

By Rob Asplin.

It had been a very wet week, set in early on the Monday and was still drizzling on Friday, and it had turned cold. The supporters of the Mighty Willaura Football Club were worried that their slick team may not be able to handle the sloppy conditions as well as those Bloody S.M.W Rovers in the big match at Willaura on Saturday.

It was mid way through the 1964 season and both Willaura and the S.M.W Rovers were unbeaten and the big clash would decide top spot on the ladder and a huge physiological advantage for the winner. Both teams had some great players and little separated the percentage, which indicated that a cracker-jack game was coming up. The whole district was talking football, and in the middle of winter all over Country Victoria, thank goodness there is football to talk about.

The Rovers new coach was a cocky ex South Melbourne player by the name of Henry Gunsmith. Henry had played 14 games with the Swans and always claimed it would have been many more if Bob Skilton was not the number one rover in the side. Skilton won three Brownlow Medals for being the fairest and best player in the V.F.L. Perhaps Henry should have tried his luck with another club, but Willaura local legend and football know all, old Jack Tempy reckoned it gave Henry something to whinge about, the fact he could have been a star at another club.

Henry from all accounts was very hard on his men on the training track and had his side fit and rearing to go. Willaura's popular coach Bill Glasson assured his team during the week that it is just going to be another game, and that the best side would win. Bill had been lured back to the club after 12 successful seasons with Ararat in the strong Wimmera League. Bill had won the goal-kicking award seven times and was a great player in all five premierships Ararat had won in this period.

The match was being played at Willaura, and early in the week the Rovers President Don Mc Claw tried to have the match transferred to the Sunday at Lake Bolac. Don was probably 30 years ahead of his time as nothing this radical had ever been mooted before. All the Churches and the pubs were up in arms, not to mention every woman in the district, and so the suggestion died.

All was set for the match; the rain even stopped on Saturday morning as old Jack Tempy took up his usual position as gatekeeper. Arriving early, and after hunting a mob of wethers from the oval, he relieved himself behind the shed, and set himself up for what would be a huge gate at Willaura. No one ever really knew how much old Jack would siphon off each time, but he was willing to do it week in, week out, come hail, rain or shine. He never complained that much, and there are never enough blokes like old Jack around country football clubs.

“There is a lot more to footy than what meets the eye”. Murray Floyd, Willaura's popular president used to say often. Murray was the publican and a good one too.

The ground was heavy after all the rain. The Rovers were a bigger side on paper than the more fleet footed Willaura side, and the early opinion was that the Rovers would be better suited to the conditions. However, a few thought that the home ground advantage would be worth a lot to the local side, and that Willaura had an up and coming champion by the name of John "Bong" Henderson.

Henderson had returned home to work the family farm from some flashy public school in Geelong, where he had modeled himself to the great Polly Farmer. The match before, Henderson knocked up getting kicks and was easily best on the ground, so he was in form, but had never played in the wet. Panic swept through the changing rooms when it was learned that Henderson had come up crook, real sick and did not think he could play. This is where men are separated from the rest and when leadership and common sense play a big part in the outcome of events. While everyone in the Willaura camp were despairing about this rotten luck and being most negative, the coach asked the chairman of selectors to fetch Doctor Checchi to the shed post haste.

Doctor Cyril Checchi was born in Melbourne in 1892 and moved to Willaura in 1920 to start a county practice which became legionary. Everybody in the district knew and loved the old doctor whom for years had served his patients well. For all this time he was honorary medical officer for the Football Club, and he really knew how to administer a needle. Now he was faced with a huge problem of getting "Bong" over the line. The team sat in silence and all the supporters were looking down watching themselves drawing imaginary circles with their feet.

The umpire arrives, and in those days the umpire would get changed with the home side and shower with the winners after the match, if he were game. He stated that he had never heard a shed so quiet. I thought this statement was quite funny at the time. We all could hear Henry next door revving his team up. Corrugated iron does not hide much noise. When some of the Willaura player's birthright was being questioned, the mood quickly changed. Many players gave the wall a decent thump with their fists, which fired the Rovers up a bit more.

Meanwhile, with all the raving and banging on the shed old Doc Checchi had arrived and was involved in a serious conversation with the coach and "Bong". The doc really knew his stuff; he told our star that he will be alright when he takes three pills. A red one now, another at quarter time and a yellow one at half time. They had to be swallowed whole, no sucking under any circumstance. Henderson downs a red pill and begins to strip for the match, this is greeted with a great cheer from all, and everything is back to normal. The doctor then handed "Bong" another pill, a blue one, only to be taken at three quarter time, if he reckoned he needed it. Our winger Larry Hager, suggested that young "Bong" would rattle and roll all night". The mood in the shed was now beginning to focus on the task at hand.

Both coaches tried to out yell each other and with the roaring a ranting from shed it was almost deafening. The doctor found “Bong” and slips him another red pill, which is swallowed immediately the teams hit the ground to a choir of car horns, this is what country football is all about.

The Rovers won the toss and elected to kick to the northern end, perhaps favoured by a slight zephyr. Just before the ball is bounced to start the game, Speedie the runner brings “Bong” another red pill, which is swallowed and the game begins. It did not take very long before everyone knew we had another useless umpire. “Where do all these bloody umpires come from?” one irate supporter yells from one eye hill, he received plenty of a, suggestions none of which I am able to print!

At quarter time the Rovers are a couple of goals up, and at the huddle “Bong” is handed a green pill, and then followed by another red one. It was noted that Henderson had not even got a touch during the quarter, and the coach moves him from the ruck to Centre half forward. He is handed an orange pill and ordered to swallow it. “Not an orange one” declared the old doctor; he has had enough pills by now. Henderson obeys the coach and down the hatch goes another pill.

Half time arrives and the Rovers have extended their lead to 5 goals, and Henderson still has not had a touch, in fact he is putting in real shocker. During the break, the coach grabs the doctor’s bag, and drives his big hand into the contents. He comes up with a fist full of pills; black, red, orange, green, brown and blue. “Which Colour? Bill asks.

“None, please he can’t have any more!” The old doctor protested.

“Here, take these black ones!” demands the mentor.

“No, no, don’t!” the old doc pleaded. But alas, too late by this time Henderson had consumed at least 10 assorted colours. The doctor walks off mumbling something about malpractice shaking his head and looking really worried.

“You can’t give a man that many pills!” was the parting comment from the doctor.

“I’ll give him anything to get him going!” Was Bill’s reply.

Back on the ground, and Henderson is back in the ruck. Willaura had to be close by three quarter time. Speedy shoots out another pill, a brown one this time. Bill had given the runner a good supply. A vicious fight between Hager and Eastwick interrupts the game, a happening everytime these two sides meet. They always fight, something to with a woman from over Tatyoon way we think.

Just before the bounce, the runner once again shoots out to Henderson and gave him a blue pill. The coach demands that no more pills to be taken, but too late, down the hatch is another pill. It was then noticed that one of the Rovers players who was knocked out during the second quarter and replaced, was back on the ground and starting to make a real nuisance of himself. Before the coach could get the umpire to take a head count, Henderson had grabbed this intruder and carted him to the fence and hurled him over like a sack of spuds into a bunch of mad Willaura supporters who made sure he did not sneak

back on the ground. Old Jack made sure he got a couple of boots in, when the poor fellow was down and not looking.

From this time on Bong completely takes over. Marks everything that comes his way, dominates the hit outs and Willaura played some great football and begin to haul in the lead the Rovers had set up early. At three quarter time Bong had Willaura right back in the game, in a fantastic solo effort.

At the huddle the Doctor advised the coach that he had quit as team doctor, and would never have anything to do with football again. Then Bill orders the runner to give Bong a couple more pills.

“No! No!” pleaded the doctor, “He has had far too many”

“Alright” replied the coach, “I guess you’re right”.

Too late, Bong had grabbed the pills and in an act of defiance swallows more pills. The doctor just walks away shaking his worried head.

Last instructions are given, the supporters leave the muddy ground, and all the kids take their footballs to kick behind the cars, then the useless umpire throws the ball into the air to start the final quarter.

Henderson grabs the ball, works his way through the pack, breaks a vicious tackle, skips free, takes a couple of bounces and bangs the ball through for a terrific running goal. The Willaura supporters hit their horns, and Old Jack and the boys on the hill are starting to become very vocal. Back in the Centre, and once again Bong gets a huge hit out, the ball is swooped on by Hager on the wing, he handballs back to Bong who breaks clear and executes a chest high pass to Glasson’s strong lead from full forward. The coach is a beautiful kick for goal, and Willaura hit the front for the first time.

At this time Gunsmith and the Rovers make their move. The roar from the crowd alerted everyone to the fact that Glasson had been felled behind the play. The nearest player was Gunsmith, and the wild brawl which followed, is still talked about to this day. Finally, with the help of the local constabulary and a bit more common sense, the umpire states that all players from both sides are reported, and he awards another kick to the groggy Glasson. Bill had recovered enough to slam through another major, and the home side is looking good. That is the way it was, Henderson dominating in the ruck and around the ground, and Glasson booting goals. The Rovers had no answer and when the bell rang the home side had recorded a comfortable win.

The umpire went home without a shower, but before he shot through reminded all that both sides are on report and with all the booing and yelling by the supporters of both sides there could even be legal ramifications! Back in the Willaura shed, which was crammed with happy fans, Bill asked for silence.

“The players who wore the red, white and black today will stand tall for ever” The coach proudly boasted. We all looked at our rover Pee Wee Young who only stood 5 foot 2 in his football boots.

“The game that Henderson played today will go down in history, and I don’t know what was in those pills, but I reckon we need a truck load!” Bill roared.

At this time the Rovers president Don Mc Claw and his coach Gunsmith, who was still bleeding from an eye, burst into the camp, much to the delight to the Willaura supporters. “This is an official protest!” bellowed the burly Mc Claw. This brought a roar of laughter from the Willaura camp. “We have reason to suspect that one of your players is on performance drugs, and we will move Heaven and Earth to get these points. The league will not tolerate this sort of behavior and we will pursue you cheating bastards through every court in Australia until we get justice!” Bellowed the very game president. At this time the supporters had thrown the two intruders into the slop outside the shed.

Later that night while Bong was telling everyone what a champion player he is, Bill quietly told the rest of us that the pills were in fact smarties.

The brain is a very powerful thing, and what the brain can think up, the body can do. No one ever told Bong that he was only on smarties, and probably to this day he still believes he was on some wonder drug, and if he could have got more, he could have played for Geelong.

The reports on all the players were thrown out, as no one could locate the poor old umpire, who had retired for good after the match.

The legal matter over drug taking during a game did not get going either, someone phoned Don Mc Claw and suggested that his woolshed would burn to the ground if any more was said about it.

That the way it was in those great days, two very proud football teams playing in the bush. The game was played hard and tough, but once the battle was over, it was over, until next time.....

2539 words
November, 1993.