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The 2024 RFL season could be one of the best yet, with competition set to be fierce throughout. PHOTOS: Grant Schwartzkopff



Nathan Schmidt



Welcome to winter sport

LACHLAN DAND

Another season of winter sport is almost upon the Riverland.

One of the biggest changes has been at The Murray Pioneer's sports desk, and if we haven't met yet I do apologise, but I'll introduce myself now.

I've always loved my sport, and one thing I've learnt since moving here from Adelaide in December is that every town values its sporting clubs and teams.

I've also been told by many that this winter sports season could be one of the best yet.

The summer season was exciting and I was particularly taken by some individual performances, such as Chelsea Wutke's basketball season for Barmera Lakers, Zakk Gallo taking wickets for fun at Renmark North, or even Berri Red recording an

undefeated baseball season.

However, the weather has changed, and thank goodness it is, because I'm not sure how many more days with temperatures above 40 I could have got through.

With the weather, plenty of change has occurred across the Riverland sporting clubs.

In the RFL, we welcome new senior coaches at Berri and Loxton North, two clubs possibly with different trajectories. But I can't wait to see what the newcomers bring.

The Murray Pioneer team has been working incredibly hard over the past two months to bring you this bumper edition of the 2024 Game Plan magazine.

You'll hear from coaches like Barmera-Monash premierships mentor Fraser Sampson, who is preparing his side to go back to back, bolstered by the inclusion of star recruit Jono Beech. Find out from Chris Eaton at the

Sedan-Cambrai Magpies whether his side has the tools to return to premiership glory in the Murray Valley football competition. Or will new coach Mick Durdin and his Murrayville Blues challenge for the premiership?

Riverland women's footy is set to be turned up a notch, with Loxton North entering the competition, as Waikerie attempts to defend its premiership.

You'll hear from the local soccer coaches, as the popular sport heads towards another big season.

Courtside, Riverland netball will have a suite of new A1 coaches, including Jane Gartner at Barmera and Jono Hartley at Loxton.

Heading over to the hockey field, Loxton hoping to defend its crown as the best A grade men's side in the Riverland, and Berri is aiming to do likewise in the women's A grade competition.

There is plenty involved in this year's edition of the magazine, so happy reading.

Intriguing RFL season looms

LACHLAN DAND

With another summer sporting season in the books, the slate has been wiped clean across the six RFL clubs, and 2024 is expected to be one of the best seasons yet.

With little separating the top five sides for most of the season, 2023 was one of the most hotly contested premierships in recent memory, ending with Barmera-Monash defying the odds to win the flag from third spot.

The Roos' win over Renmark, which recovered from a points deduction to finish atop of the ladder at the end of the minor round, was one of the lowest-scoring RFL grand finals of all time.

While Barmera-Monash starts the season as premiership favourites, it has lost some backline talent, with Jack Sullivan and Michael Mock departing, while forward dynamo Sam De Michele also leaving the club.

However, one of the biggest RFL signings in recent history has landed at the Lakeside, with former Adelaide Crows forward (and West Adelaide star) Jono Beech returning to his junior club.

Beech brings with him fellow SANFL experienced players Chris Bonney and Mason Middleton, along with Luke Thomas.

On the other side of the Fisher Cup is Berri, which has welcomed one of its

favourite sons in Brenton Woolston back to the club as A grade coach.

'Woolly' has a monumental mountain to climb with the Demons, who went winless in both the A grade and B grade in 2023, but a change in the football department could bring success to Demonland.

Finishing second was unfamiliar territory for Josh Vater and Renmark, after three straight flags, but expect the talented Rovers to again challenge for the title this year.

Assisting them in the hunt will be ex-local Nick Gillard, who returns to the club after time spent in both the SANFL with Central Districts, and the Adelaide Footy League.

The RFL world was sent into a spin in February when the much-loved Terry Eleftheriadis left Loxton North after just one season back at the club.

However, to their credit, the Panthers swooped on Dave Higgins, who brings with him a wealth of experience

after time spent with Glenelg, Collingwood, and most recently Tailem Bend.

While North has lost a number of players, opportunity has arisen for its junior crop, as it looks to atone for 2023's straight-sets exit from the finals series.

The Ricciuto name is back at Waikerie, with Reuben, the nephew of Adelaide Crows legend Mark, to pull on the black and white stripes in 2024.

Michael Kilsby's side showed glimpses in 2023, ultimately finishing inside the top four, before being bounced out in the opening weekend of finals.

However, with a bulk of the playing list aged under 25, Waikerie is expected to play an exciting brand of football in 2024.

Finally, the time is now for Luke Harder's Loxton to take the next step and break a premiership drought which stretches back to 2006.

Loxton is arguably the most

intriguing side in the RFL in 2024.

For Harder's second season in charge in 2024, Loxton will boast plenty of talent, including several recruits making the move to the club.

Former Hope Valley ruckman Brayden De Prinse headlines the inclusions, while the athletic Rogan Kennedy will no doubt cause opposition coaches some headaches throughout the year.

It all makes for an exciting season, but a tipster's nightmare.



Barmera-Monash and Renmark battling it out on Grand Final day in 2023.

PHOTO: Grant Schwartzkopff

Lochie's Crystal Ball

PREMIERS

Barmera-Monash

RUNNER-UP

Renmark Rovers

WHILLAS MEDAL

Josh Vater

LEADING

GOAL KICKER

Jono Beech



Barmera United still booming

PAUL MITCHELL

Like other sports in town, Barmera United Soccer Club is enjoying a prosperous and successful period, largely driven by strong player numbers and solid administration.

Last year the Pelicans won the A grade men's Top Four Cup and finished second in the premiership, continuing a run of success atop – or near – the Riverland soccer totem pole.

Illustrating the club's strength, the initial senior men's squad exceeded 26 players last year, but unfortunately the demise of the Riverland B grade competition left a number of players without a game each week.

In addition, the senior women finished second behind the powerful Renmark Olympic side.

Expect Barmera to continue to exhibit that strong showing in season 2024, armed with some of the most talented men and women in the region.

Marty Barber is acting as player-coach for the A grade men, assisted by Kevin Barber, who is doubling as senior women's coach.

Marty remains one of the best senior



Jesse Tsonis will play an important role in 2024.

players in the Riverland, but will again be flanked by other top talent, such as Dimitri Kanakaris, James Wallace and Riley Haigh.

Club newcomer Brayden Croxton is coaching the Pelicans under 16 girls team and is expected to line up in the senior men's team.

Club president Joe Lewin said Croxton is a welcome addition to the club.

"Brayden used to coach Gawler Eagles," Mr Lewin explained.

"He's a good asset for us."

While Barmera United's early trainings were impacted by hot weather, Lewin said the club had unearthed a potential star in the form of Jack McCracken, from the Northern Territory.

"He actually played in the Alice Springs competition," Mr Lewin said.

"He's a first-year under 16 and a very talented player. He's been training with the A grade side, so we're hoping to slot him in somewhere.

"Fortunately, a few of those really good senior players are still there and they're going to be the ones that gel that whole side together, I think, given their experience."

Mr Lewin said Barmera's excess player numbers last year meant the club was right being the push to re-establish a men's B grade competition.

"It's especially (important) for our kids who are no longer eligible for the under 16 competition," he said.

"That sort of leaves them in limbo if they're not quite good enough for A grade."

Mr Lewin is coaching Barmera's under 12s team.

Other coaches for 2024 are:

Under 14s – Charlie Vanderwoude and Jesse Tsonis

Under 16s – Brayden Croxton

Under 13 girls – Mikayla Rayner and Matilda Mitchell

Senior women – Kevin Barber

A men – Marty Barber



James Wallace in action in 2023.
PHOTOS: Grant Schwartzkopf





Winds of change for River Rangers

LACHLAN DAND

It has been another off-season of significant change for the Berri River Rangers, with new coach Peter Exarheas taking the reins.

Berri has had a high squad turnover for the second season running, with a number of players departing the region.

This means River Rangers will rely on their department of youth yet again, as they seek to climb up the ladder following a third-place finish in the league last season.

While conceding the year ahead appears to be challenging, Exarheas said Berri would experiment with a new game plan throughout the season.

"At the moment we have a really young squad, so it will be challenging but certainly a lot of trial and error for us," he said.

"Our biggest focus is working at a better game plan which suits us and our play style to help us springboard up the ladder and push for a place in the

Top Four Cup final."

Inconsistency was one of Berri's biggest struggles last season, with results varying wildly.

After beginning the season with a 12-0 victory over Loxton United, River Rangers lost their next three matches, illustrating a pattern of results over the season.

This left Berri languishing in third place behind Renmark Olympic and Barmera United, and this preceded a first-round exit in the Top Four Cup against the Pelicans.

Exarheas says this means the club is working on a defensive approach throughout the pre-season as it hopes to stop the rot: conceding 47 goals across the season.

"We will be a stronger side defensively, but we always want to move the ball a lot quicker when we have it in our possession," he said.

"You have to play to your strengths, so we need to shut down the opposition's best players and then counter attack and be positive when we have the ball.

"You always play out the first five minutes in the style you want to play and then you have to make lots of decisions as the game progresses."



Thomas Pipinis in action in 2023. PHOTOS: Grant Schwartzkopf

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Player increase bolsters confidence

STEPHANIE THOMPSON

After a difficult few seasons, Loxton United is back on track with an increase in players bolstering spirits.

Loxton United Soccer Club president Matt Perram said he was looking forward to the season ahead.

"It's looking better than the last couple of seasons, definitely," he said.

"We've had a lot out to training.

"It is looking good."

Perram said he expected to see some new players in the men's side.

"For seniors, we have a lot of strong young men who have joined this year," he said.

"Hopefully they will play well as a team after some good trainings."

Perram said he was hopeful the Riverland would be able to have a B grade competition, with Loxton looking to field a side.

"Getting some numbers for B grade would be good," he said.

The women's open side began training in early March and are expected to be competitive again in 2024.

Progression will continue to be key for the Tigers, with the club keen to continue focussing on development in 2024.

"We are very much a family-orientated club," Perram said.

"We love the kids getting involved."

Not only does the club have an increase in numbers on the field, but also off the field.

"We have a lot of numbers in the committee this year," Perram said.

"We are looking forward to the season a lot more than the last couple just due to larger numbers who have shown some interest early."



Nick Mitchell Cocks is set to be an important performer for United in 2024.
PHOTOS: Grant Schwartzkopff



Steady hands at Renmark Olympic

HUGH SCHUITMAKER

Experience on the pitch and sidelines will benefit one of the region's most successful soccer clubs this season.

Renmark Olympic senior men's coach Daniel Clarke was confident in how his pre-season was progressing.

"We have begun training with a pre-season seven-a-side competition, although the hot weather has seen an interrupted start to that," he said.

"Full pre-season training will ramp up soon.

"Our numbers are looking okay at the moment although we are still looking to add more depth to the team."

Clarke said while some returning players would be crucial, giving opportunities



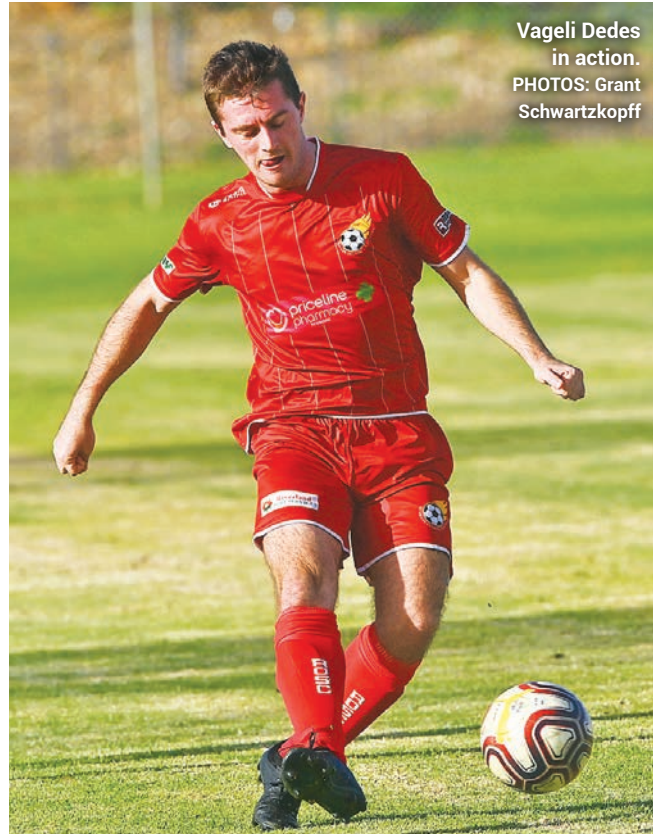
to youth was also a priority.

"We have some more senior and experienced players returning for the 2024 season depending how they get through pre-season, which will be valuable to the squad," he said.

"We have however, lost a couple senior players and some seasonal workers that joined our team last year, which will give an opportunity for some of our bright up and coming players to shine."

Olympic claimed the RSA premiership last season, before being defeated by Barmera United in the Top Four Cup final.

Clarke said making positive progress each week would again result in Olympic contending for trophies.



Vageli Dedes in action.
PHOTOS: Grant Schwartzkopff

"The key to replicating the success of last year is commitment and consistency," he said.

"If we can keep all of our players on the pitch each week and remain disciplined in terms of structure and set-up, there is no reason we cannot be successful again this year.

"Of course the goal at the start of the year is to win trophies. We will always try

and win every game that we play and we will see where that leaves us at the end of the season."

Clarke said further senior players were encouraged to register for a potential return of a B grade.

"There is an attempt to bring the B grade competition back, so if there are any other footballers out there wanting to put the boots back on, please get in touch," he said.



Renmark Olympic men's 2023 premiership team.

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The Berri Hockey Club has seen an interest toward the sport ahead of the 2024 season. PHOTOS: Grant Schwartzkopff



Berri Hockey Club numbers 'strong and steady'

ALEXANDRA BULL

An increase in activity and interest towards hockey has seen the Berri Hockey Club looking to field teams into each age group for the 2024 Riverland Hockey Association season.

With the season start being earlier this year, Berri Hockey Club president Brett Stokes said it has prevented full trainings from properly commencing, but added

there have been some good numbers throughout the club's pre-season fitness sessions.

"It is pretty early on in the season to predict the strength of our club, however we have been buoyed by the activity and interest we have had for the upcoming season and look to put teams into each age group of the 2024 competition," he said.

"We are always encouraging of junior players experiencing senior grade hockey.

"We like to give them the experience of the skill and pace of the game so that they can have an easier or smoother transition into full time senior ranks."

Danial Shawyer will take on the coaching role for the A grade men's team, with Nicole Mentha appointed the A grade women's coach.

"It will be interesting to see how their influence and style of coaching changes the team's overall performance," Stokes said.

"As stated previously, we are looking to field teams in all age groups and in previous years, have managed to field two teams in the under 12 age group.

"This is all dependent on picking up a few new players to the sport in those junior grades may have us consider fielding more sides.

"Numbers are otherwise strong and steady."

While the departure of hockey-star Maddy Spanno is no doubt a blow, Todd Kitto from Seacliff Hockey Club joins the club, bringing with him a wealth of experience.

"We are happy to have had Todd Kitto join our club

this year. He has previously played for Seacliff in the Premier League competition and is a recognised high-profile player at state level for Hockey SA," Stokes said.

"Todd also has a very expansive knowledge in coaching being the Vanuatu National coach, Hockey SA state coach and high-performance coach, and founder of KM Coaching who hold clinics throughout the state.

"His introduction to the club, as a player and resource for coaches, will be invaluable."

Stokes added that "we are looking forward to continually support our club, players, parents, families, volunteers and sponsors during the 2024 with club events and promotions throughout the year".

"We pride ourselves on being a strong club in membership, identity and history, and providing an environment that is fun, exciting and successful."



Daniel Shawyer

**BERRI
HOCKEY CLUB**



Loxton looking to stay consistent

STEPHANIE THOMPSON

Consistency and rising to the challenge will be the two common themes for the Loxton Hockey Club in finding success this year.

For the men's A grade side, 2024 is about continuing to build on last year's success, while the women will move back into A grade.

Loxton Hockey Club A grade men's coach Sam Carr said the team was looking forward to a successful season, after knocking off an undefeated Waikerie in last year's grand final contest.

"We had a pretty good result

last year, so it would be nice to try and emulate that," he said.

"We've got basically the same team as we did last year, which I think is a benefit as we will get better the more we play together.

"We've had some players working hard over the summer that have been getting pretty fit."

Loxton has managed to pick up some former Renmark A grade players, while some younger players will continue to rise through the ranks.

"I think we had four or five players win in the under 18 premiership as well as the A grade premiership last year, so it shows we do have a good amount of youth

coming through," Carr said.

"We are excited to have some of those boys step up even more this year and really increase our junior strength."

Just four teams will be in this year's A grade men's competition.

"Because there is no fifth team, or no byes, the competition will be a lot more even and a lot more competitive," Carr said.

"I feel like staying consistent throughout the whole year and putting together 15 weeks back-to-back will be the biggest challenge."

Liam Richardson will coach the women's A grade side this year.

"They've picked up a few

extra players and have decided to take the step up," Carr said.

After playing in last year's winning side, Carr said he was looking forward to his coaching role.

"I moved up here 18 months ago for work and have played hockey pretty competitively all my life.

"I feel I have some knowledge I can give back to the team, as well as the juniors."



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Renmark will look to rebuild in 2024.
PHOTO: Grant Schwartzkopff

A new foundation for Renmark hockey

HUGH SCHUITMAKER

Ensuring player numbers remain sustainable is a priority for Renmark Hockey Club this year.

Renmark Hockey Club president Kylie Radloff said a number of teams would merge with Loxton for the 2024 season.

"The Renmark Hockey Club are focusing on rebuilding for the 2024 season and developing our talented up-and-coming juniors," Radloff said.

"Due to a shortage of players, we have been in negotiations with Loxton Hockey Club about combining many of our teams this year in order to keep the competition going.

"It is important for hockey in the Riverland on the whole to remain viable, and we are focusing on what we as a club can do to contribute to its continued success."

Radloff hoped this would allow the club to focus on recruitment and

youth development.

"Numbers are a bit down this year, and as a result, we are not nominating an A grade men's or women's team," she said.

"Our junior numbers in the under 14s and under 18 women's grades are strong, and we are working in co-operation with Loxton to combine our under 12 mixed and under 18 men's teams this season."

Radloff said key female players Ella Pick, Kaela Smart and Amanda Schubert would be assets for Loxton's side.

"Due to not nominating any A grade teams this year, several of our senior men and women players will be joining other clubs to help bolster their numbers," she said.

"With Loxton nominating an A grade women side... some of our talented juniors in Ella Pick and Kaela Smart will add their strength to the team, along with veteran goalkeeper Amanda Schubert.

"In the B grade competition, both Renmark sides look to be competitive, and will be aiming to be in the finals action come September.

"The Renmark/Loxton combined team won the U/18 men's premiership last year, and are looking to be a strong contender again this year."

Radloff expected Renmark's B grade sides would contend for trophies this season.

"Our B grade men are a solid team with years of experience, and will be drawing on this to be a competitive force come finals," she said

"Our B grade women have been in the mix for the past few seasons, without being able to quite seal the deal.

"With many of our seniors playing in both the A grade and B grade competition for several seasons, burn-out had been a big issue for our teams come finals.

"Without the pressure of stretching players to fill both A grade and B grade teams, we expect both our men and women to have strong seasons and be contenders for the big dance at the end of the season."

Radloff said creating a foundation for future success was a goal.

"With some exciting new junior players joining our club, we will be focusing on developing those players and building their skills, while also focusing on continued recruiting efforts for the future," she said.

"Regarding our senior teams, we will be looking to continue the positive culture we pride ourselves on at Renmark, and work toward creating a solid foundation of senior players to build on for future seasons.

"Giving juniors the opportunity to step up and play in the B grade will help their confidence and hopefully encourage them to continue with hockey down the track."



Waikerie eyes on the finals

CHRISTINE WEBSTER

Waikerie's men and women A grade hockey teams are both aiming for grand final berths this season.

Both teams performed well last year, with the A grade men remaining undefeated until grand final day where Loxton won 2-1.

The Waikerie A grade women earned a place in last year's preliminary final, but Mildura/ Sunraysia beat them for a place in the grand final against Berri.

Berri then defeated the visitors 4-1.

Waikerie Hockey Club president Vicki Schmidt said the A Grade men were keen to have another go at the premiership.

"They are keen to get back out there and have another crack," she said.

Schmidt said the A grade women's team were also eager to improve on their performance last year and become grand final contenders.

"The girls were such a young team and pretty much all of them are sticking around again this season," she said.

"It will predominantly be the under 18 girls team again and possibly three or four senior players mainly in their 20s," Ms Schmidt said.

She said among the players to watch were Justice Ebert, Alana Matulick and her daughter Trinity Schmidt.

Ryan Edwards will coach the A grade women this year, while playing in the B grade men's team.

His daughter Abbey will also play A grade after joining them last year.

"Ryan has a lot of knowledge to bring to the girls and a lot of direction and support," Schmidt said.

Waikerie's B grade women were premiers last year and are looking forward to this season.

The team is made up of several experienced players including Ms Schmidt and Sarah Schiller.

"We are beyond our use-by date as A grade players, but the knowledge is still there," she said.

Schmidt said the B grade also consisted of some younger players and mums who were supporting their daughters on the hockey field.

Waikerie's B grade men also won their grand final against Berri 5-2 last year.



“ Ryan has a lot of knowledge to bring to the girls and a lot of direction and support.



Last year's Waikerie B grade men premiers.
PHOTOS: Grant Schwartzkopff



Last year's Waikerie B grade women premiers.

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Barmera building some positivity

PAUL MITCHELL

A refreshing absence of 'coach-speak' allows Jane Gartner to talk realistically – but still optimistically – about how Barmera Netball Club has approached the 2024 season.

Appointed A1 coach a long way out (relatively speaking, for netball) from the season, Gartner is banking on a positive atmosphere around the club translating to strong on-court performances.

"We've been trying to bring everyone together, and make it a fun, comfortable atmosphere, with lots of laughs as well, which is nice," she said.

"For me personally, that's how I like to play netball, so that's the kind of vibe we're trying to bring for the kids and the seniors as well.

"We try to have open and

honest communication with everybody, because people don't like that in-the-dark, secret squirrels crap.

"I think everybody is appreciating it so far."

Since losing the 2021 A1 grade final against a powerful, undefeated Renmark side, Barmera has slipped back down the ladder to more familiar territory over the past two seasons.

The 2024 season looms as another step in the rebuilding phase, with Gartner and the club keen to keep developing juniors to complement the smattering of returning seniors.

Chloe Drogemuller is the main absentee from the team that finished with a 2-13 win/loss record in 2024, while A2 regular Millie Koumbarakos has shifted to Renmark.

Working with an A1-A2 squad, Gartner said the club expects further improvement from talented

junior trio Ayla Gilgen, Layla Moore and Hallie Hodgson, who have all had a taste at senior level.

Fresh from a solid A1 debut season in 2023, Jemma Kassulke is also expected to be a major contributor in 2024, while veteran midcourter Sue Whitbourne is lining up again.

"Sue has put her hand up to play again this season and it's good to have her playing that senior role for the girls again," Gartner said.

"We've also got Jenna Selfe who will come back and play in A1 or A2 capacity, depending on her commitments.

"And Khaleisha Barnett had last year off, when she travelled, but she'll be back to seniors this year. She'll be really handy.

"It's good that we've retained pretty much all the A1 group from last year in the squad.

"We have a youthful bunch, but they're pretty fit and raring to have a crack, and that's all I can ask for."

Former A1 coach Sam Wellington is supporting Gartner this season, while newcomer Jacinta Turner is coaching the club's A2 side.

"Jacinta's come over from Victoria and she's great," Gartner said.

"She'll bring a lot of different insight, I think. The game's not different over there, but they might have different

structures and different formats.

"It's just been nice for us to have a different point of view."

Far from being negative about the prospects of tackling the A1 season with a bunch of young underdogs, Gartner is – again – realistic about her assignment.

"It happens regularly with all the juniors that play," she said.

"They cycle through, then the next kids step up and hopefully build their confidence and skill set, and are solid contributors for the club at senior level.

"Last year was the changing of the guard, so you've got to push the next line of girls to step up. We'll keep building them."

Gartner, 42, played A1 for Barmera as a junior, then left the region for 13 years, before returning and again playing at the top local level in 2021.

She "stepped back" to a lower grade in 2022, then was playing-coach for the club's B1 side last year.

"I decided at the end of last year that I wanted to try to make a positive change for the Barmera Netball Club and put my hand up early to coach," she said.

"If you can put your hand up early it makes a big difference for the girls to know that someone's committing.

"So I'm looking forward to giving it a crack."

Katri Stavrou is coaching Barmera's under 17A side this year, while Hannah Boylan and Sue Whitbourne are sharing the under 15A job.



Jemma Kassulke is set to be a major contributor for Barmera's A1 side in 2024. PHOTO: Grant Schwartzkopff

BARMERA
Netball Club



A new look Renmark netball squad

ALEXANDRA BULL

The Renmark Netball Club's A1 and A2 squads will look a little different heading into the 2024 season, with only five returning plays from the 2023 A1 and A2 squads, and a new A1 coach in tow.

With trials completed and squads selected, training is well underway, with the club now beginning its 'rebuilding phase', after going down in two Riverland Netball Association A1 grand finals in a row.

New A1 coach Tegan Moldovan, who brings with her a wealth of netball experience, along with A2 coach Sonja Modlinski, are both excited to get the season underway.



Renmark will have a new look netball side in 2024. PHOTOS: Grant Schwartzkopff

"The A squad will train for a few weeks as one, then teams will be selected closer to round one," Moldovan said.

"So, players have a good opportunity to push for A1 selection.

"I think every clubs goal for the season is to play finals and take home a premiership.

"However, we are at the beginning of a rebuild and while we will still strive to achieve this, our biggest goal for the season is to create a positive and cohesive A squad culture, where every player is supported and provided with opportunity to build their skills and game-play knowledge."

Five out of a possible 18 players from the 2023 A1 runners-up team and A2 premiership team have returned for 2024, with some new players joining the club, juniors who are now seniors and returning players to the club, there



is a strong focus on the season ahead.

"We are also very excited to see the return of Amelia Koumborakas, who has been playing for Barmera A2," Moldovan said.

"We are most looking forward to the challenges and successes throughout the season and seeing what we can achieve."

North's the place to be as numbers soar

STEPHANIE THOMPSON

Optimism for a successful 2024 season is oozing out of the Loxton North Netball Club, with "huge" registration numbers and exciting new additions.

The club got off to an early start and president Jess Miller said there was a "record number" of registrations.

"It's unlike anything we've ever seen," she said.

"We have 17 or 18 teams in total, which is unheard of."

Miller said the A1 side will look a bit different this year, thanks to a few handy additions and a notable loss.

"Our ins are pretty exciting, so we have the likes of Ellie Gray, Kirriley Wagner and Jenna Barry back.

"A couple of those girls are back from having years off and being at uni and things like that.

"We've also got a really exciting in which is Ella Anderson, who comes from a bit of a Matrics background.

"She's a med student, so she is looking for a bit of an outlet to have some fun.

"She'll bring huge depth.

"We've lost Paige Roberts, so she is off to uni."

In the A2s, Helen Schober

will return, while Ash Voigt will join the team.

Miller said Loxton North continues to pride itself on its junior pathways and programs.

"There's a couple of juniors who have cemented their name into our A squad, so they aren't training partners, they are actual players," she said.

"Kiara Harman is definitely one to watch, along with Maddie Groth."

Leading the A1 side is well-known Loxton North club stalwart, Renee Williams.

"Our committee definitely head hunted Renee for this position," Miller said.

"It means we do lose her through our junior development, which is sad as that's where her strengths have lied and our girls have only benefited from that.

"Renee's got a really good outlook on growth and where she wants to see people.

"She really knows how to get the best out of every single player."

With a "relatively new group", Miller said the bonding process for A squad was well under way, reading to tackle the 2024 season.



Alyce Worsfold. PHOTOS: Grant Schwartzkopf



Paris Lawrie



Melody Pfeiler



Loxton took out the RNA in 2023.
PHOTO: Grant Schwartzkopff

Tigers hungry for more success

STEPHANIE THOMPSON

After the Loxton A1 side walked away with the last year's flag, the Tigers are looking to build on their success with some handy inclusions joining the side for 2024.

Loxton A1 coach Jonathon 'Jono' Hartley said he was looking forward to providing an opportunity for younger players to grow throughout the season.

"My role this year is about having aspiring juniors come through the ranks and then having those really strong mentors within the club to mentors those young players," he said.

"It's about making sure everyone is putting their best foot forward and what are we going to do to support the next person in taking a step forward in their netball journey."

While most of last year's premiership side will remain the same with only three players leaving, they leave big shoes to fill.

"Unfortunately this year we lose Hollie Bullock, Skye Beauchamp and Summer Smith from our playing group," Hartley said.

"Riverland netball is a steppingstone for Summer and she will continue to play and build on her game as she continues on with her netball journey in Adelaide.

"We've also lost Hollie Bullock, who is obviously a pivotal part to the teams' success last year.

"Hollie is taking some time off to spend with her family and recover from injury.

"Hollie will still be around the club but won't be in the playing capacity this year."

Skye Beauchamp is another massive loss to the Tigers opening up opportunities throughout the mid court.

While the team is facing some big losses, it is also gaining some big inclusions.

"Coming in we've picked up Wunkar best and fairest winner, Skyla Schulz," Hartley said.

"Taylor Dabinett is a past player who has come back to play and is another handy pick up we'll have come through the mid courts this year.

"We have Jess Ridley to provide some more support through our midcourt but is a very versatile player across the whole court. Jess is first year out of under 17s this year, so she is looking

forward to the senior step up.

"We've also picked up Connie Doupis, who will also provide greater versatility throughout our playing group."

Bailey Hahn is also expected to play a pivotal role for the side this year.

Shyla Lange will step in the A2 coach role and Hartley said he was looking forward to building upon Loxton's positive culture, with the A1 and A2 sides to run as a squad.

"We want people to feel wanted and comfortable with being uncomfortable, whether that's taking a risk or stepping outside of their position comfort zone," he said.

"I've had a really good reception from the Loxton community in general and phone calls from life members and past players that have all rang to give me a hand in some capacity.

"I think we can have some even greater success this year."





Berri netball's eye on progress

HUGH SCHUITEMAKER

A senior Riverland netball side wants to maximise the benefits of a team-focused environment in 2024.

Berri Netball Club A1 coach Kristy Reid said building a team atmosphere had been a priority leading into the season.

"We have a squad with some new members, so we are starting with some team

building before hitting the court in preparation for the season," she said.

Reid said ensuring younger players could progress into the A1 side was key to the club's future.

"2023 season saw us make finals, so was great for the club. Berri Netball Club is extremely happy with the direction we are heading," she said.

"We take lead from the club and the values that the club are enforcing and let that flow from the top grade through to the juniors.

"Young players and development are our focus again this season. We are introducing train on's, so when it is their time for A grade the transition will be smooth."

Reid said developing and new players would be important in replacing some departing names.

"Unfortunately, we have lost three players to Adelaide and interstate," she said.

"These were our more experienced players, so that leaves a bit of a hole and they will be missed, but we have some new players to the club and some breaking through from A2, so there's exciting times ahead."

Reid said once again contending for a trophy was a goal for the 2024 season.

"To make finals we need to work hard all season," she said.

"Through this time, as coaches we will prepare them as much as we can, then it is up to the players to get that belief to get them over the line.

"Our goals for the season are very club based – commitment, connection, culture.

"And of course at lot of hard work."



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Taniel Willmott playing for Berri.
PHOTOS: Grant Schwartzkopff



Waikerie aims for a season of development

CHRISTINE WEBSTER

The Waikerie Netball Club will be striving to build on the experience it gained from the Riverland A1 competition last year.

This will be the club's third season at the premier level after a comeback in 2022.

For four years from 2017 the club was unable to enter an A1 team.

Waikerie Netball Club president Michelle Burns said some of the younger players were given the opportunity to gain invaluable experience last year.

"The girls last year did an awesome job," she said.

"We had a lot of younger players who learned from the small group of experienced players in the team who encouraged them".

The Waikerie team broke their winless drought of seven-years in the A1s by beating Barmera in May last year.

Burns said unlike other Riverland towns, Waikerie had a smaller group to select from for the A grade.

She said some of the more experienced younger players in the 17 to 21-year-old bracket had left the town to attend university.

"Throughout the Riverland all clubs seem to be struggling with that age group at the moment," Burns said.

However, Waikerie is planning to enter eight or nine teams in the Riverland competition this year.

Burns said like last year, some of the club's players in their later teens would be given the opportunity to play A grade with the team's more senior experienced players,

She said Rachel Sparrow, Julia Golding, and Brooke Wilksch were among the senior players that would hopefully mentor younger ones.

"They have played A grade in the past and they may be looking to slow down, and it will be good for them to pass on

their experience to others," Ms Burns said.

She said the club was also welcoming some past players back into the fold.

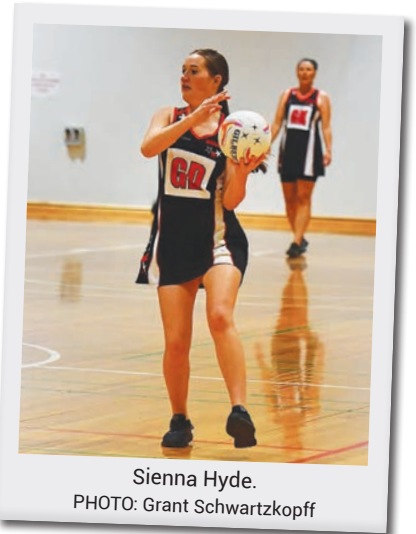
"Some of them haven't played for a few years and are returning, which is great to see," she said.

Burns said Waikerie also had some promising young players moving up the ranks.

"We have players around the ages of 11 to 15 that will be good to keep watching," she said.

"With experience, they get better and better and we need to try and keep them here to continue that."

Ms Burns said anyone wishing to become involved in the Waikerie Netball Club as a player, coach, or volunteer at the canteen was welcome.



Sienna Hyde.

PHOTO: Grant Schwartzkopff



The team that broke Waikerie's A1 drought last year by defeating Barmera: Jamie-Lee Kuchel (left), Brooke Wilksch, Shae Glacken, Sienna Hyde, Ashleigh Leuders, Kirsty Glacken, Zali Schutz and Taylah Gore, with Callie Leuders front and centre. PHOTO: supplied

RFL ALL GRADES DRAW 2024

1 SATURDAY APRIL 20	10 SATURDAY JUNE 29
Loxton v Berri Barmera-Monash v Renmark Waikerie v Loxton North	Berri v Waikerie Barmera-Monash v Loxton North Loxton v Renmark
2 SATURDAY APRIL 27	11 SATURDAY JULY 6
Berri v Loxton North Renmark v Waikerie Loxton v Barmera-Monash	Loxton v Berri Waikerie v Loxton North Barmera-Monash v Renmark
3 SATURDAY MAY 4	BYE SATURDAY JULY 13
Barmera-Monash v Berri Waikerie v Loxton Loxton North v Renmark	SA COUNTRY CHAMPIONSHIPS
4 SATURDAY MAY 11	12 SATURDAY JULY 20
Berri v Renmark Loxton v Loxton North (Proud Cup) Barmera-Monash v Waikerie	Berri v Loxton North Renmark v Waikerie Loxton v Barmera-Monash
5 SATURDAY MAY 18	13 SATURDAY JULY 27
Waikerie v Berri Loxton North v Barmera-Monash Renmark v Loxton	Barmera-Monash v Berri (Fisher Cup) Waikerie v Loxton Loxton North v Renmark
6 SATURDAY MAY 25	14 SATURDAY AUGUST 3
THINK! ROAD SAFETY ROUND	Berri v Renmark Loxton v Loxton North Barmera-Monash v Waikerie
Berri v Loxton Renmark v Barmera-Monash Loxton North v Waikerie	15 SATURDAY AUGUST 10
7 SATURDAY JUNE 1	Waikerie v Berri Loxton North v Barmera-Monash Renmark v Loxton
Loxton North v Berri Waikerie v Renmark (Gill/Lehmann Cup) Barmera-Monash v Loxton	16 SATURDAY AUGUST 17
BYE SATURDAY JUNE 8	Berri v Loxton Renmark v Barmera-Monash Loxton North v Waikerie
INTERLEAGUE V AND NETBALL COUNTRY CHAMPS	
8 SATURDAY JUNE 15	SATURDAY AUGUST 24
Berri v Barmera-Monash Loxton v Waikerie Renmark v Loxton North	2ND SEMI FINAL @ Loxton
9 SATURDAY JUNE 22	SUNDAY AUGUST 25
Renmark v Berri Loxton North v Loxton Waikerie v Barmera-Monash	1ST SEMI FINAL @ Berri
	SATURDAY AUGUST 31
	PRELIMINARY FINAL @ Renmark
	SATURDAY SEPTEMBER 7
	GRAND FINAL @ Loxton North

MVFNL ALL GRADES DRAW 2024

1 SATURDAY APRIL 13	11 SATURDAY JUNE 29
Sedan Cambrai v Brown's Well Murrayville v BSR Ramco v Wunkar	Brown's Well v Sedan Cambrai BSR v Murrayville Wunkar v Ramco
2 SATURDAY APRIL 20	12 SATURDAY JULY 6
BSR v Paringa Sedan Cambrai v Ramco Wunkar v Murrayville	Paringa v BSR Ramco v Sedan Cambrai Murrayville v Wunkar
3 SATURDAY APRIL 27	BYE SATURDAY JULY 13
Ramco v Brown's Well Paringa v Wunkar Murrayville v Sedan Cambrai	SA COUNTRY CHAMPIONSHIPS
4 SATURDAY MAY 4	13 SATURDAY JULY 20
Wunkar v BSR Brown's Well v Murrayville Sedan Cambrai v Paringa	Brown's Well v Ramco Wunkar v Paringa Sedan Cambrai v Murrayville
5 SATURDAY MAY 11	14 SATURDAY JULY 27
Murrayville v Ramco BSR v Sedan Cambrai Paringa v Brown's Well	BSR v Wunkar Murrayville v Brown's Well Paringa v Sedan Cambrai
6 SATURDAY MAY 18	15 SATURDAY AUGUST 3
Sedan Cambrai v Wunkar Ramco v Paringa Brown's Well v BSR	Ramco v Murrayville Sedan Cambrai v BSR Brown's Well v Paringa
7 SATURDAY MAY 25	16 SATURDAY AUGUST 10
Paringa v Murrayville Wunkar v Brown's Well BSR v Ramco	Wunkar v Sedan Cambrai Paringa v Ramco BSR v Brown's Well
8 SATURDAY JUNE 1	17 SATURDAY AUGUST 17
Murrayville v Sedan Cambrai BSR v Brown's Well	Murrayville v Paringa Brown's Well v Wunkar Ramco v BSR
BYE SATURDAY JUNE 8	SATURDAY AUGUST 24
LONG WEEKEND BYE	SEMI FINALS @ Paringa
9 SATURDAY JUNE 15	SATURDAY AUGUST 31
Sedan Cambrai v Ramco Paringa v BSR Brown's Well v Wunkar	PRELIMINARY FINAL @ Blanchetown
10 SATURDAY JUNE 22	SATURDAY SEPTEMBER 7
Wunkar v Murrayville Ramco v Paringa	GRAND FINAL @ Cambrai



Waikerie wonders

LACHLAN DAND

Since the inception of the Riverland Women's Football League in 2018, Berri had been crowned the queens of the competition every season, until a change in 2023.

Waikerie caused an upset of grand proportions last year, defeating Berri in enemy territory in what was a low-scoring affair.

In blustery conditions, a Sarah Campbell goal was all the match needed, with the Magpies emerging victorious by 10 points.

However, a new season brings new opportunities, and 2024 could be the biggest year the RWFL has ever seen.

Firstly, there is a new team in the competition, with Loxton North entering the frame, having previously

merged with the Magpies.

Thursday night football has the opportunity to boost numbers watching the game higher than ever before, with the competition under lights as Waikerie attempts to defend its crown.

Interest in women's football is also peaking, following the successes of the Saturdays are for the Girls program, which ran from October to December.

There is quality at every club, too. Kayla Mudge returns for another season at Barmera-Monash, Faith Morgan is set to roam free in the Renmark midfield, and Stacey Geyer continues kicking goals for the Demons.

Perhaps these players can lead their team to success, but with numbers continuing to grow following combined training sessions, Waikerie will be tough to beat again in 2024.



PHOTOS: Grant Schwartzkopff

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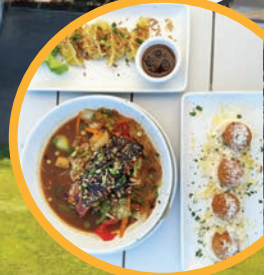


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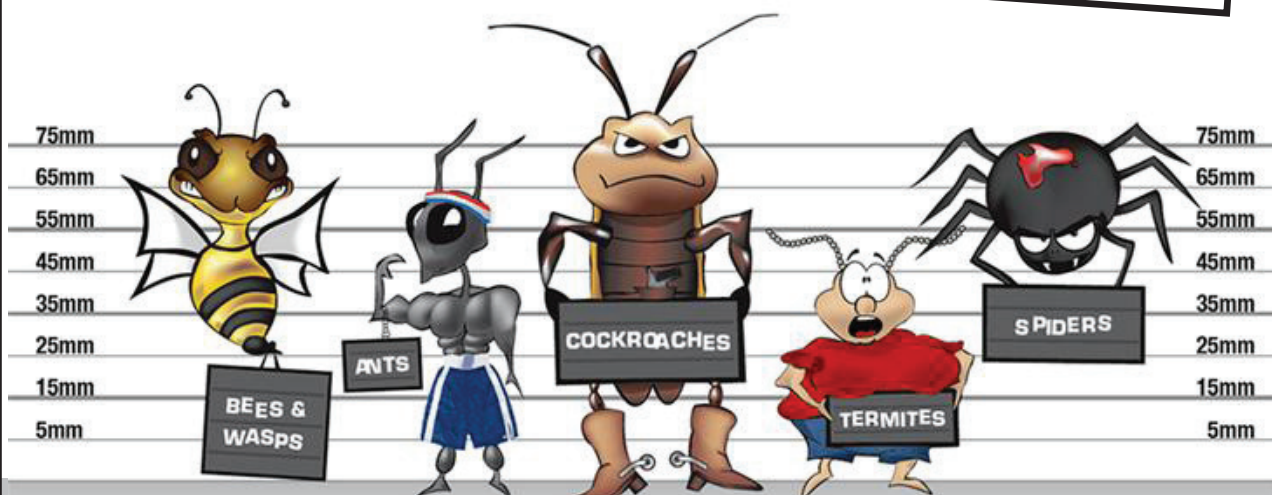
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New era at Panther Park

LACHLAN DAND

The RFL world was thrown into a spin when long-standing coach Terry Eleftheriadis resigned as coach of Loxton North in February.

Plenty of interest now surrounds Panther Park following the appointment of highly regarded Dave Higgins as senior coach. What might he bring to the club?

The Panthers were one of the most interesting stories of 2023, sitting pretty atop the RFL ladder after 10 rounds with an 8-2 record.

However, they ultimately dropped to second place behind Renmark, then bowed out of the finals series in straight sets.

But with Higgins in charge now, the slate has been wiped clean.

He is excited about the prospect of coaching in the Riverland – a key reason why he took on the job.

"Obviously it's all a big unknown for me, being new to the club and new to the league," he said.

"But I'm enthused and encouraged by the core group we have.

"We've got a pretty good mix of experience and youth, and the coaching group are really passionate about

footy so I'm looking forward to working with them and learning from them.

"I'd just got back into coaching so I had a bit of renewed interest, and then once I spoke with (football operations manager) Ben Williams, his enthusiasm was contagious so I thought 'why not?'.

"I really enjoyed my time at Tailem Bend, and I enjoy the country footy feel and the community footy idea."

Higgins says he will have minimal expectations of his group in 2024 as he navigates his new coaching challenge.

However, he wants his side to be competitive and build on the progress made by the club under Eleftheriadis' guidance in 2023.

"My expectation is we're going to be competitive, enthusiastic, have a crack, and just enjoy ourselves," he said.

"Where that leaves us at the end of the year I'm not sure because I don't know about our opposition, apart from the fact that some clubs have recruited well and have been strong for several years.

"We've got our work cut out for us, and we're obviously behind the eightball with me starting late.

"But our other coaches have had the group running and doing skill work, so we're

“We’ve got a pretty good mix of experience and youth, and the coaching group are really passionate about footy...”



Zac Woolridge in action for Loxton North in 2023.
PHOTOS: Grant Schwartzkopff



Ryan Proud lines up for goal.

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not that far behind. It's just going to be my ability to have an impact on the group which will make a difference."

Under Eleftheriadis the Panthers operated an old-school style approach, making them hard to score against, meanwhile, they recorded big scores in the process including a 29-goal rout against Berri in round 12.

Higgins says the Panthers are going to be an exciting team to watch in 2024, with free-flowing football high on the agenda.

"I like to operate that style, but I need to work out our strengths and weaknesses and build our game plan from that," he said.

"I just want us to be really hard to play against, and what that means needs to be figured out, but we'll be



building on our strengths regardless."

The department of youth is going to be a talking point for North in 2024, with Higgins focusing on junior development as the club looks towards the future, while having a focus on the current season.

"My understanding is we've had a lot of players play senior footy over the last two years, so I'll certainly be looking to further develop those guys," he said.

"There's talk that there's going to be a few coming



New Loxton North head coach Dave Higgins. PHOTO: Tracy Proud

from last years under 18s team so there will be a focus on those, but that doesn't take away my focus on the other players at the same time.

"But, these guys might be 10-year players at our footy club, so it's my duty to develop them as best as I can to be senior footballers for Loxton North.

"There is a focus on them,

but it certainly won't be at the expense of the rest of our playing list."

KEY INS

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KEY OUTS

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Waikerie had a topsy-turvy season throughout 2023.



Young Magpies aiming high

LACHLAN DAND

An intriguing 2023 season for the Waikerie Magpies culminated in an elimination final exit at the hands of eventual premiers Barmera-Monash.

It was a rollercoaster season for Michael Kilsby's side, which won four of its first five games, including against bitter rivals Renmark at home in round one.

However, the Pies ultimately lost six of their final seven games, dropping to fourth place, with the lack of a

dominant forward presence costing them dearly.

In hoping to make a deeper finals impact, Kilsby says his side only needs to make minor adjustments.

"We brought in a new gameplan last year so we're just going to keep building on that and keep moving forward with what we already know," he said.

"It seemed to work well last year, I just think we need to refine it a little bit and become more confident with it.

"I don't think we were far off the mark. We had a few injuries and a few people become unavailable which killed our confidence and we just couldn't re-gather that by the end of the year.

"A second season of a new coach is the year where you really want to start getting things right and being confident with what we're doing."

Waikerie has been one of the strongest sides of the RFL's modern era, winning three premierships in a row between 2016-18, and playing off in eight deciders since the 2014 season.

"We plan to push towards finals and from there it really becomes a whole new challenge for us," Kilsby said.

"We don't want to be too arrogant in what we're trying to achieve. We just want to make finals and make sure we play our best footy at the right time of the year which I don't think we did last year.

"But everyone is trying to achieve what we're trying to achieve..."

Waikerie will field one of the youngest sides in the RFL A grade competition, with a bulk of the team under 25.

Kilsby admits this could open his side up to inconsistency, but the Magpies will remain an exciting team to watch in season 2024.

"Everyone is under the age of 24 apart from three players," he said.

"We're going to be exciting to watch because we're going to run the footy..."

"Until the younger players get some games under their belt, we could be quite inconsistent."

The 2024 season will be

“We plan to push towards finals and from there it really becomes a whole new challenge for us.

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WAIKERIE MAGPIES

Kilsby's second in charge of the Magpies, and he says he feels much more confident about the RFL landscape than season 2023.

"I'm a lot better prepared with everything than I was this time last year, and the club has been really good with everything," he said.

"It's a work in progress at the moment, and I hope to be around for many years to come and make sure we get it right with this young group to see what we can do..."

"I'm a firm believer in sticking to a process, because if you stick to the process for a long time you're going to get it right and results will fall your way.

"There's no point having a guy come in and say after one year it's not working. It's about refining it and

getting it right and going again.

"I hope the club sticks with me, and we can do this for a long period of time and ultimately start winning some premierships."

KEY INS

Tom Sheldon, Zac Still, Jake Grubb, Reuben Ricciuto, Jackson Pillion, Byron Sumner.

KEY OUTS

Tyrell Hocking, Kyran Dixon, Ethan Neal, Tom Sclanders, Noah Hyde, Jacob Couch.



Mitchell Hahn was a force in attack for Waikerie in 2023.
PHOTOS: Grant Schwartzkopff



Lachlan Nitschke kicks for goal.

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New era dawns upon Demons

LACHLAN DAND

Following one of the most difficult seasons in the history of the Berri Football Club, the winds of change have swept across Demonland, and Berri stalwart Brenton Woolston is the newest coach of the A grade side.

Berri went winless in 2023, however, it wasn't all doom and gloom for the Demons. Berri blooded a healthy crop of youngsters last year, looking towards the future and showing signs of competitiveness throughout the season.

The Demons' closest margin in 2023 was a 22-point loss against bitter rivals and eventual premier Barmera-Monash, giving fans something to look forward to in 2024.

Woolston says he is excited to get settled into the year ahead, mentioning that the supporters have plenty to look forward to.

"We really want to re-establish the Berri Football Club's proud 114-year history by working with a committed football department and playing group to develop a blueprint for future club success," he said.

"As senior coaches we play an important connection to the local community and

most importantly to our club sponsors, members, and supporters.

"We play for premiership points but I, like many at the club, are passionate about the welfare of our footy club and the upward direction and journey we are embarking on, and I am grateful to be a part of it.

"Along with our coaching and support staff, we are strong believers in our local BFC talent and game day x-factor.

"Our players will be given every opportunity to shine this year and play an enjoyable, positive brand of football that will onboard our Berri Demons supporters.

"Our coaching group are continuing to implement team standards, game day principles and performance expectations that complement our team make-up.

"We hope to demonstrate to our fans a discipline from our playing group for them to 'bring and do their best' during training sessions and on game day."

Affectionately known as 'Woolly', the newest coach is no stranger to the Berri Football Club, with the 58-year-old a former Demon player, and long serving member and official.

He believes it's a factor which will work in his favour, with experience and maturity on his side, and

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with level heads required in 2024.

"If I take some learnings from my professional business career, my tenure and motivation as senior club coach is to lead, develop and lay down a foundation and structure for future, sustained success for the Berri Football Club," he said.

"As a football club and football department, we have taken the opportunity to recalibrate key aspects on how we operate and perform on and off the field.

"We are enthusiastically looking forward to the 2024 season to track our club's performance and celebrate the successes when they are achieved."

Woolston says pre-season training has been positive, with many of the group showing they have what it takes to play at the top level.

Competition for spots has also gone up a gear, with Dion Brauer and Brad Rosenzweig among newcomers pulling on the red and blue in 2024, following their recent moves from Morphettville Park and the Southern Mallee Suns respectively.

"A real boost in the lead up to the 2024 season has been the support received to improve club performance, he said.

"To be able to return to a senior coaching role has been so well supported by having a well-credentialled football operations team, and well-credentialled coaches.



Tarquin Newton showed promise in 2023 for the Demons.



Berri legend Peter Safralidis showed no signs of slowing down in 2023. PHOTOS: Grant Schwartzkopff

"Dave Dayman and BFC legend Alan Brand are our assistant coaches, while Jamie Milburn continues as our reserves coach, with Mark Wenman set to coach the under 18s side.

"Nathan Geyer, Chis Woods and Dave Binney have put in place an engaging preseason program to increase our physical and mental fitness to drive training and game day performances.

"We enter the 2024 season with a level of confidence that we have a good foundation of fitness in our under 18 and senior playing group.

"We have a young A grade playing group, with over 70 per cent of our list at 22 years of age or younger.

"However, many of this age group have played more than 20 A grade games, so they are now in a window of playing consistent, high quality football.

"We also have emerging talent in the under 18s, who have put club coaches and selectors on notice after a strong preseason and they're keen to improve and development attitude.

"They will further complement our top-line

players that have served and played representative football over past seasons."

KEY INS

Dion Brauer, Martin Sumner, Brad Dolling, Josh Woolston, Patty Minchella,

Angus Dayman, Issac Woolston, Kyran Bishop, Brad Rosenzweig.

KEY OUTS

Tom Jolly, Kade Harkins, Michael Corbett, Jarah Jackson, Michael Toogood.

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BERRI
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Luke Harder kicks for goal in 2023.
PHOTOS: Grant Schwartzkopff

Is it Tiger time in 2024?

LACHLAN DAND

One of the most intriguing storylines of the 2023 RFL season surrounded the Loxton Football Club and how it fell victim to the tight nature of the competition.

In their first season under former Port Adelaide SANFL player Luke Harder,

the Tigers only missed finals due to percentage, finishing less than 4 per cent behind fourth placed Waikerie.

The pain of missing finals in such heartbreaking fashion has likely burned the Tigers all pre-season. After having a particularly rough year with injuries to key players, Harder's side has flown under the radar in the off-season, and is now widely tipped to be in the final four at the end of the season.

"I think every team would be eyeing finals off, and that's certainly the goal, but it is a pretty tight competition and each team on their day can beat anyone," Harder said.

"We have to make sure at the start of the year we're focused and ready to go.

"On our day, with the list we have, we can beat anyone so it's about bringing the intent from the get-go and sticking to our processes.

"Something I've learnt over my football journey is that if you're outcome focused it can go against you sometimes, so if you're process focused it will show that on the scoreboard."

The 2024 season will be Harder's



Raphael Liddle had a strong season at Loxton in 2023.



second in charge at Tigerland, and he says he feels he has a better handle on the Riverland Football League.

"We're a lot fitter than we were this time last year, and I've definitely been putting the kilometres into the boys," he said.

"I've changed a bit from my first year as senior coach last year, and we're now showing signs of natural development with areas of improvement.

"Our training has been a bit different from what it was, in a positive way, and the attitude of the group has been unreal with the young kids leading the pack.

"The senior boys have been inspired by the younger ones coming through on the track. They come with great energy every session.

"We're getting really good numbers at our sessions too, so the more fitness we can get into our players is only going to help us long term.

"I think if you ask any first-year coach it's always going to be a challenging

year, no matter where you finish on the ladder because there's still so much to learn.

"You have to build relationships and find the balance. Now that I've been able to sit back and look at it from this time last year, I feel a lot more confident in myself and how we as a footy club can go forward."

While the Tigers missed finals footy in 2023, they're no stranger to featuring at the pointy end of the competition.

Loxton played off in preliminary finals in 2021 and 2022, ultimately coming up short at the hands of Renmark and Waikerie respectively.

Harder says the bulk of his side knows what to expect in finals football.

"The self-belief is definitely there, but we just need to focus on round one against Berri to start with," he said.

"If the processes are going how we want them to, everything will take care of itself.

"At the moment we're not looking too far ahead, but the boys have been there before, so hopefully we can push

past our injury issues from last year, and have a bit of luck go our way, we can feature at the pointy end.

"It's going to be a very even competition, having looked at what some of the other clubs are doing..."

KEY INS

Bailey Boughen, Rogan Kennedy, Brayden De Prinse, Ben Yeomans, Harley Campbell, Kaiden Evans, Riley Walton

KEY OUTS

Chris Knapp, Jack Evans, John Fisher, Jonte Bates

“On our day, with the list we have, we can beat anyone so it's about bringing the intent from the get-go and sticking to our processes.”



Tigers captain Jesse Will in action during season 2023.

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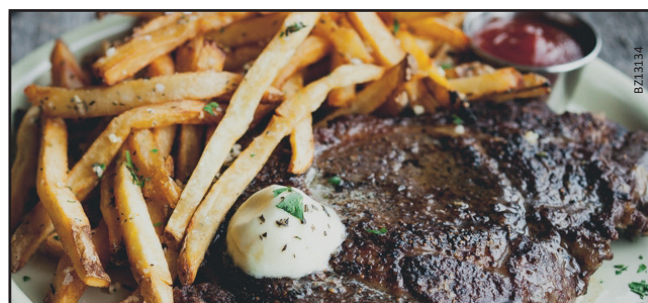


Barmera-Monash celebrate the 2023 RFL premiership.
PHOTOS: Grant Schwartzkopff.



Fraser Sampson will lead Barmera-Monash again in 2024.

Roos looking rosy for back-to-back



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LACHLAN DAND

Entering the season as reigning premiers – following its 2023 grand-final triumph over Renmark – is a task Barmera-Monash hasn't faced for 11 years.

Many teams face the prospect of a premiership hangover the year after achieving the ultimate glory, but the Roos have attacked the off-season hard and will no doubt be in premiership calculations yet again.

The return of former West Adelaide SANFL star – and Adelaide Crow – Jono Beech to his home club is one of the biggest coups the RFL has seen in years.

In addition, the return of former Roos players Chris Bonney and Mason Middleton, both with SANFL league experience, together with Luke Thomas,

makes Barmera-Monash a formidable proposition.

Head coach Fraser Sampson achieved premiership success as a player at Renmark on multiple occasions, so it's abundantly clear he knows how to attack an off-season burdened by expectations.

"My experiences at Renmark have certainly helped me at Barmera as I saw firsthand how a successful program is built and sustained each year," he said.

"Regarding the external expectations, I focus my energy towards achieving our own goals and executing our game plan, rather than the opinions of others.

"Our big message is to embrace the challenge (and) this group showed during finals that we can handle the pressure.

"My messaging will certainly be around

focusing on our game plan and controlling what we can."

The 2024 season will be Sampson's second in charge of the Roos, and his focus is clearly on the entire club, not just its senior program.

He says club culture remains as a topic high on the agenda, with a return to finals for the club's B grade side for the first time since 2018 on the cards.

"I am really excited to have another opportunity to work with this senior group and build on the development we made in 2023," he said.

"We will continue to work hard on creating the best club culture we can. I'm really motivated to work with the other coaches to push everyone to find ways to improve their own game.

"Our targets are around building a positive club culture and buying into a team-first game plan. If we are able to achieve these targets, it will result in successful on-field results."

While Barmera-Monash has recruited spectacularly well, quality players have left the club in the form of defensive duo Michael Mock and Jack Sullivan, along with premiership hero Sam De Michele, who won The Murray Pioneer trophy for best on ground in the grand final.

However, Sampson said the current group has responded well to pre-season training, zoning in on strength and conditioning training.

"Training numbers have been quite strong with around 40 each night. Toby Gartner from Body Boss

Studio has been great in running the strength and conditioning component of our pre-season," he said.

"We completed three training sessions before Christmas, then started again mid-January."

Barmera-Monash's defence was outstanding in 2023, but the Roos rarely racked up big scores and winning margins.

"Hopefully we manage to score more freely than we did last year," Sampson said.

"However, we will continue to place a strong emphasis on our defence as we believe this is a strength of our group.

"On the back of our successful under 18 season, we have a great stock of young talent coming through including Campbell

Marks, Lucas Warnett, Rory Moore, Lachie Marks, Nick Richardson, Aidan Scordo, Braiden Bagguley, Sam Vanderwoude, Hayden Carter and Cohen Harris."

KEY INS

Matt Wutke, Jono Beech, Chris Bonney, Mason Middleton, Luke Thomas, Fraser Douglass, Steve Sullivan, Kale Trussell, Brad Barnes.

KEY OUTS

Michael Mock, Sam DeMichele, Jack Sullivan.



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Renmark superstar Josh Vater is primed for another strong season.

Rovers out to reclaim their crown

LACHLAN DAND

Renmark has been the standard-setter of the RFL's modern era, playing off in the past five grand finals.

Across that time, the Rovers have won three of those grand finals, but ultimately fell short against Barmera-Monash in the 2023 decider by nine points.

That has meant a few months of hurt for a Renmark side that for the previous three pre-seasons has been given the title of premierships favourites.

Renmark coach Josh Vater says

while 2024 will be challenging, he is optimistic about what the Rovers can do.

"It sounds like a cliché, but every season presents a new challenge in the sense that there's always some personnel changes," he said.

"Very few seasons do teams stay exactly the same. We've got younger guys coming through to replace the older guys on the way out.

"I'm really excited because it's going to be challenging with a new group, but within that lies the excitement because that's where you get some growth.

"I'm optimistic about where we're at and to see how some people step up, because when you have changes it's

about who steps up into new roles.

"We've been working on a few things with our game plan, because we're always looking to adapt and change things up structurally and how we want to play the game..."

Expectations are once again high at the kennel, with quality players aplenty through the Renmark side.

It's a key reason as to why the Rovers have been so successful over the past five RFL seasons.

"A few years ago we sat down and set out a purpose for the senior group, and that hasn't changed," he said.

"That purpose is not driven by wins and losses, but around building a sustained culture of success and enjoyment.

"Both of those aspects are really important to us, and we obviously want success but that can look different to some.

"You're always vying to win the premiership, but at the end of the day there's five teams who don't win a premiership, and I would hope those teams don't think their seasons were wasted.

"It's about that balance of, 'Yes we're driving for success, but we also want enjoyment and families to be involved in our footy club and enjoy it'.

"We want to work hard and get better, and through that we'll win some games of footy, which will be the



Jaryd Rowe in action for Renmark in 2023. PHOTOS: Grant Schwartzkopff



Nathan Zunic will be a force in attack for the Rovers yet again.



outcome of the stuff we're after."

Renmark came into 2023 with a points deduction to its name following a player eligibility issue throughout the 2022 finals series.

That meant starting last season's campaign with -4 points. Vater says while the group didn't address the issue, it played a role in the feeling around the club.

"It probably was a negative that was hanging over our heads a little bit..." he said.

"It'll be nice to actually start on zero

points, and to not have it as a factor on players' minds about where we sit on the ladder, because it took until round four to get back to zero points.

"We still ended up finishing top, which was an amazing effort, but to not have that hanging over our heads will be nice.

"(It) probably changed how we used players a bit last year, and my philosophy on development players was thrown off a bit because we just needed to get points on the board."

Vater said his group had been motivated from the first training of the season.

"I think it stirs a fire in the belly when you don't have the success and you feel like you've underperformed and you were so close," he said.

"We've seen really good numbers out on the track throughout pre-season, and hopefully that only continues to grow.

"We've been training our seniors with our under 18s side which has been really good and that's only going to

help us in the long run."

Under Vater's guidance, the Rovers have been known to play a fast style of football, and it is something which has held them in good stead.

They're expected to perform well again in 2024, and challenge towards the top end of finals with boom recruit Nick Gillard returning home.

As season 2024 approaches, Vater says an exciting brand of footy is forecasted for Renmark Oval.

"I'd expect some of our players to take another step up, and really look to take the game on," he said.

"Players who are used to playing in certain positions might go to that next level and become really consistent players."

KEY INS

Nick Gillard, Cody Reese, Oliver Springs.

KEY OUTS

Lachlan Lellmann, Tom Austin, Dain Austin, Jack Austin.

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The Bombers start 2024 as one of the premiership favourites.

Can the Bombers go one better?

LACHLAN DAND

After finishing as the bridesmaids in the inaugural Murray Valley Football Netball League (MVFNL) competition, Brown's Well is looking to atone for its grand final loss to Sedan-Cambrai.

Brown's Well was the only side to give the unbeaten Magpies any sort of a scare, via a 15-point loss in round five.

The Bombers enter the season as one of the clear favourites, having strengthened the list over the off-season period, and coach Jeremy Miatke says signs are "very positive" at Paruna.

"We never expected to get to the grand final last year," he said.

"We just did a hard pre-season and thought we'd give it everything we had.

"This year we want to just build on that again and to go one better would be the ultimate goal, but that's not everything.

"We're building a good culture, which is something we really focus on as a club and we've been able to recruit really well.

"After you lose a grand final it's something which really burns over the pre-season, and everyone has come back in great shape."

Brown's Well's ability to hit the scoreboard so frequently was a key feature of its 2023 campaign.

Miatke says the Bombers will look to use their height again, with a similar style of

game expected in 2024.

"We're a very strong team so we'll utilise that again and it's led by the midfield with Brian Hampel rucking," he said.

"We've got two guys who are pushing a similar height to him, and a few new recruits who are over six foot, too.

"We're just looking to play a really strong and attacking game of football, and if we have to play defensive, we're strong in that part of the ground as well.

"I think we're in good stead. We're going to be stronger than we were last year, and if we need to re-adjust we can do that during the season."

BROWN'S WELL FOOTBALL CLUB



Jeremy Miatke is set to coach Brown's Well in 2024.
PHOTOS: Grant Schwartzkopff



Sedan-Cambrai won the inaugural MVFNL in 2023.
PHOTO: Grant Schwartzkopff

Magpies ready to fly

LACHLAN DAND

Premiership defences around sporting leagues are never easy, and the same task looks likely for Sedan-Cambrai this year, which defeated Brown's Well in last year's inaugural Murray Valley football grand final.

The Magpies have been one of the premier sides in the competition for several years, finishing runner-up in 2022, before breaking through to win the 2023 grand final by 38 points.

It capped off a dream season for head coach Chris Eaton and his side, which finishing undefeated and resembled a wrecking ball all year long.

This season presents a tantalising prospect for Sedan-Cambrai, as it gets the opportunity to host the grand final. Eaton says the mantle is going to be tough to maintain, conceding that his side will more than likely "come back to the pack" in 2024 on the back of a

handful of Magpies departing the nest.

"Our core group is still there, but we've probably lost four or five from last year's side which has meant we've had to recruit some locals back to the club," he said.

"In the grand scheme of things, if you don't have a squad of about 30 players, there will be weeks where you struggle to pull a team together.

"We've brought in a points allocation system this year, and we're allowed 11 points so it's going to be interesting to see how the clubs navigate that."

Sedan-Cambrai has a big focus on the youth of the club, as it continues to look to its future.

Eaton maintains that success is generated by the local players at the Magpies.

"The biggest thing for us over the last two years has been our recruitment, and the fact we've been driving to get our younger players to stay and develop their football with us," he said.

"You look at it and think they'll move on eventually, but if you bring the



locals back to where they grew up, you can try to stop having to rely on some of the older guys.

"In saying that, you always manage to get a team on the park, but unavailability can strike you at any stage."

Eaton says the biggest goal from his side in 2024 will be to remain competitive, with the competition appearing to be stronger than 2023.

"We didn't go into last year thinking we'd go through undefeated, and it wasn't something we talked about until about seven or eight games into the year," he said.

"This year we're conscious of the fact we've got some older players so we need to make sure we're not burning everyone out.

"Our goal is to be top two, and that hasn't changed while I have been at the club."



Last year's
Ramco Roosters
A Grade players.

Ramco optimistic about success

CHRISTINE WEBSTER

The 2024 season is shaping up to be competitive for Ramco footballers in the Murray Valley Football Netball League's second year.

Last year the Roosters just missed out on a spot in the grand final, after being eliminated by Brown's Well in the preliminary final.

Newly appointed A grade coach Barry Gavranich is making a return to the club.

He said after the strong performance last year Ramco was feeling positive about this season.

Gavranich previously coached the club from 2015 to 2017, before becoming a coach for Mawson Lakes for six years.

This year at Ramco will be his 12th year in a row as a senior coach.

Gavranich said the club has more than 40 players to choose from to form an A grade team.

"We have a mix of young and old, it has balanced out nicely with the ages ranging from 18 to 40 years old," he said.

"Everyone will be working hard for a spot in the team and this is a good positive thing to have."

Star ruckman Jack Parfitt is expected to continue as captain for another year and Adam Weir, Nathan Hart, Kaleb Kuchel and Ben Briscoe are also all expected to make their mark this season.

The Roosters have also brought in some new recruits from Adelaide, Brown's Well and Waikerie, and some former players have also returned to the fold.

Gavranich said the goal is to make Ramco a destination club.

"We want to keep the excitement, vibe and family atmosphere going," he said.

"The players mean a lot to the community and on a Saturday both football and netball receive strong support and that means a lot to the boys."

Gavranich said a healthy competitive rivalry existed in the Murray Valley Football Netball League.

"It will be exciting to see what the second year of this football league brings," he said.

"On the day we want to beat each other, but we are all mates and have a drink after the game.

"All the little town communities get on well."



Ramco Roosters president Nathan Hart (left) with the club's newly appointed A grade coach Barry Gavranich.

PHOTOS: supplied



Redbacks aiming to bounce back

LACHLAN DAND

Led by a new coach, the BSR Redbacks are looking to bounce back up the ladder, and recover from somewhat of a premiership hangover.

The Redbacks won the 2022 RFL Independent decider, but failed to make the final four in the inaugural season of the Murray Valley competition last year, finishing in fifth place with just three wins.

However, 2024 has brought about change at BSR, with star midfielder Jimmy Mapstone assuming the role as player/coach.

Mapstone is no stranger to leadership at the Redbacks, appointed as their captain in 2023 – with his passion for the club shining through.

He says pre-season training was a solid base for 2024, with the Redbacks hoping to atone for a flat 2023.

"We had a pretty disappointing year last year..." he said.

"But we've been getting some really good numbers

on the training track compared to previous years which really helps.

"We've changed our approach this year and gone with a lot more match-simulation stuff to try and keep people interested.

"We've got a few guys from Adelaide and when you're doing basic drills it's a long drive for them. So, we're doing more hands-on work than just running laps and the boys are really fit."

Mapstone says his side will aim to play a fast and exciting style of play, very much in the mould of modern football.

"We want to come out of the blocks early and see where it gets us," he said.

"And if we need a 'Plan B' after that then that's something we'll deal with.

"Our club goal is to just make the four and then it becomes a case of who knows from there.

"We've seen with any sporting league around the world that you just have to get into the finals and then it's anyone's game from there.

"That's mine and the club's expectations, so we've been

relaying that message to the playing group all pre-season.

"We can't just go out and say we want to win the premiership because that's everyone's goal. It's about what we're doing to put our best foot forward and give ourselves the best opportunity."



Jimmy Mapstone will coach BSR in 2024.
PHOTOS: Facebook





Bulldogs' eyes on the prize

LACHLAN DAND

There is renewed hope and optimism at Wunkar in 2024 under new coach Mark Wilksch.

Armed with a strong list, including talented ex-Loxton North newcomers Jack Obst and Kyle Worsfold, the Bulldogs are poised to bounce back from a success-starved 2023 season that saw them finish second last.

The Bulldogs were competitive at times last season, winning games against BSR and Paringa, while also pushing Ramco, and third placed Murrayville.

However, Wunkar was no match for top sides Sedan-Cambrai and Brown's Well, illustrated by a 177-point hiding in round five against the Magpies.

Inconsistency meant change at the top, and with former coach Tom Wood moving to Paringa to take up an off-field position, the door opened up for Wilksch to join the kennel.

Wilksch brings plenty of football experience to the Bulldogs.

He coached juniors at Berri and Loxton North, including a premiership with the latter's under 18 side in 2013. Wilksch was also assistant to Craig Wooldridge when the Panthers won the 2015 A grade title.

In announcing his arrival, Wunkar said:

"An exponent of attacking football, combined with disciplined defending, and highly regarded in coaching circles as a teacher of the game, Mark's enthusiasm and fresh ideas combined with a young core of players is a recipe

for excitement."

Wilksch himself said while the season would be a personal learning curve, the playing group has a positive mindset.

"The aim at this stage is to just be competitive, and once you've got that locked away, you can work on the next stages," he said.

"We're trying to get a lot of buy-in to what we're doing, and how we move the ball away from a contested area has been our key focus at training.

"We have to make sure that we work as a team and understand you don't necessarily need to have the ball in hand to be involved in the overall play.

"Numbers have been really solid on the training track, which gives us some more options so we aren't just plugging holes."

Wilksch says while finals football is the ultimate goal, enjoyment is a key focus.

"The boys have been really up and about and I really haven't had to drive much of anything because they're all really motivated," he said

"There's a lot of enthusiasm around the place, and I'm really happy with how everything is going.

"Everyone is looking forward to what should be a ripping year and that's really self-generated at the moment which is awesome to see."



Jack Obst (left) has signed for Wunkar.
PHOTOS: Facebook



The Swans will be looking to rebound from a tough 2023 season.



Paringa looks to the future

LACHLAN DAND

A summer of off-field changes has dominated the football story at Paringa ahead of season 2024, following a last-place finish the year prior.

The Swans won just two games in 2023, defeating Blanchetown-Swan Reach (BSR), and Ramco after a low-scoring affair in scrappy conditions, both at home.

It isn't expected to get much easier for Paringa, with key forward Dean Hill making the move to Murrayville under Mick Durdin.

However, it isn't all doom and gloom for the Swans, who will look at a new approach off field, with favourite son Tom Wood returning as club president.

Wood brings with him a wealth of experience, having spent time at rival club Wunkar as its head coach.

Paringa has attacked pre-season training with all guns blazing, going through some gruelling sessions on the sandbar.

There will still be a sense of familiarity for the Swans, with Chris Gardner set to undertake his 15th year at the club with another stint in the coaches box.

Gardner will be a key cog both on and off the field,



Chris Gardner will take control of Paringa in 2024.
PHOTOS: Grant Schwartzkopff

with his leadership expected to shine through as Paringa hopes to catapult up the ladder.

The Swans open their season with a bye in the first round, before travelling to Blanchetown for a clash with BSR.





New coach, new aspirations at Murrayville

PAUL MITCHELL

Armed with a new coach who knows how to win grand finals, Murrayville looms as a realistic premiership threat in the 2024 Murray Valley football competition.

Mick Durdin famously lifted East Murray to a flag in 2003, when the Murray Valley competition was called the RFL Independents. Family ties brought him to Murrayville last season and after a year observing on the sidelines, he has taken on the top job – and is aiming high.

Murrayville finished third at the end of the minor round, just percentage behind second-ranked Brown's Well, but had an off day against Ramco in the first semi-final, to make an early exit.

However, some new recruits and renewed enthusiasm among the existing player base has hopes high that the Blues – renamed from the

Bulldogs in 2023 to avoid a clash with Wunkar – can go at least a couple of steps further this year.

"I think we'll be very competitive (but) it'll take time for the team to react to my new game style," Durdin said.

"I expect we'll come home with a head of steam."

Durdin's footballing message has always revolved around accountability, and woe betide any of his players fond of running forward without manning up.

"You must man up, you must apply pressure," he said.

Murrayville look to have the tools to mount a serious charge at the title, bolstered by a number of newcomers.

Heading that list are former Loxton North pair Keenan Wilksch, who was runner-up in the RFL B grade medal, and Brandon Martin. Wilksch should play in the midfield, while Martin is a versatile type, capable of playing at either end.

Joining them at Murrayville is Loxton recruit Jasper Hoffmann, a winner of RFL B grade medal. Hoffmann has A grade experience and can play midfield, but is a particularly damaging forward with several bags under his belt.

Further adding to the scoring power at Durdin's disposal is prolific RFL

Independent goal kicker Dean Hill, who played in five premierships with Paringa and booted over 700 goals along the way.

"The big fella is keen and has lost a lot of weight," Durdin said.

"It's great to have him on board."

In addition, 2023 leading goal kicker Nathan Wright-Bramfit will also slot into the forward line, giving Murrayville a potent look.

Returning to the club is ruckman Malcolm Moore, who had some experience with Southern Mallee Suns in the River Murray competition last season. Moore played with Murrayville in 2022 and was described by Durdin as having "a lot of raw ability".

Other leading lights for Murrayville this season are likely to be Cooper Wisneske, co-captains Geordie Franks and Clayton Sporn, and Durdin's son, Jake, who will welcome Moore's arrival to share the ruck duties.

Durdin is also expecting big contributions from Ryan Lewis, Clayton Godden and others.

Influenced by farming duties, training numbers were light on initially, but have lifted in recent weeks, and overall the club looks to have plenty of depth. Durdin has coached a handful of senior clubs and

says joining the Blues has been a smooth transition.

"I've been made to feel very welcome, even last year when I was only watching," he said.

"A new bloke come out and said 'everyone's made me feel so welcome, why wouldn't I play footy out here?', so that shows what sort of club it is.

"We had a Saturday training in January. Some new blokes came out, but weren't sure they were going to play. Well, they mixed with the blokes afterwards and that convinced them to play with us, because they've been made to feel so welcome."

Durdin's assistant is Riley Watson and together the duo will be plotting a path through a potentially tricky opening four matches, against BSR, Wunkar, Sedan and Brown's Well – all with a young line-up.

"Those matches will sort out where we're going," Durdin said.

"People might say I'm only playing the kids because I haven't got enough numbers.

"That's wrong: I'm playing the kids for one reason: because they're good enough.

"And they've been improving every week during pre-season."





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