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## 2025



# THE RIVERLAND SPORTS PREVIEW *WINTER*



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Loxton North and Barmera-Monash will be backing themselves to be in the hunt for the 2025 RFL A grade premiership.

# Winter sport arrives again

## LACHLAN DAND

**If you have felt a cold change come through the Riverland in recent weeks for the first time since October, only one thing can be true – winter sporting season is here.**

While we've seen an incredible summer season from individuals and clubs, ranging from the lofty heights of Martin Sumner and his Berri Cricket Club, to the continual rise of the Renmark Steamers and Barmera Lakers in basketball, this summer season has had it all.

Yet, the intrigue of the winter sporting seasons around the Riverland has continued to linger, and coming off one of the most exciting campaigns which was 2024, everyone is ready to go again.

The footballs, netballs, soccer balls, and hockey sticks have all been dusted off, and pumped up, and optimism at what 2025 could provide is ringing truer than ever before.

If you're either new to the Riverland, or have somehow forgotten the chaos of last winter, let's catch you up to speed.

Renmark Olympic completed one of the most spectacular soccer seasons seen in recent history, with it's A grade men's side achieving an invincible season.

Olympic left little in their wake last winter, ultimately cruising to the Top Four Cup final, while its A grade women's side also tasted the ultimate success.

Yet, the wounds inflicted upon Barmera United, Berri River Rangers, and Loxton United would have stung all summer, and all three will be out for revenge this year in what's set to be an enthralling campaign.

Heading over to the hockey field, Sunraysia was welcomed back to the Riverland league in 2024, and were able to take out the women's decider, so Waikerie, among others, will be leading the charge to reclaim the crown.

Berri took home the A grade men's final, and the Demons will be hoping to secure back-to-back glory, with Loxton expected to breathe down their necks once more.

Courtside, who could ever forget that netball season? It's A1 and A2 2024 grand finals certainly never will be. Loxton completed a stunning A1 season, finishing undefeated, but were pushed into a last gasp overtime winner

that had to be seen to be believed.

One thing is for certain though – Loxton North will be leading the charge for revenge, with Berri, Renmark, and Barmera all in tow.

The league welcomes new coaches in both Barmera and Renmark too, so anticipation is as high as ever before.

But the one that seems to be catching everyone's eye, and dominating the discussion, is the upcoming RFL season.

Renmark shocked Barmera-Monash on grand final day in 2024, and it was two late goals from Pioneer medallist Tim Woolford that stole the headlines, and brought the cup back to the kennel.

But other than the grand final itself, it was an RFL season which had it all.

From Berri breaking a two-year win drought, to Barmera-Monash winning grand finals in the junior grades and dominating much of the home-away season, and Loxton rising as high as second in the middle of the year, before being injury ravaged.

Who could forget North's ability to recover from a coach departure, and Waikerie's young star Kade Hilton taking his young Magpies to a preliminary final, and just days later, becoming the fourth-youngest ever Whillas medallist.

The staff here at The Murray Pioneer have been working incredibly hard over the past couple of months to bring you this magazine, and by the end you'll be counting down to round one.

Happy reading.



Renmark and Berri were both finalists in the A1 competition last year, and competition is expected to be high once again. PHOTOS: Grant Schwartzkopff



# Final siren set to sound on Wendy's netball career

**LACHLAN DAND**

**She is one of the most dedicated people to Riverland sport in the whole region, but season 2025 is set to be Wendy Gambling's last in her role with the RNA (Riverland Netball Association).**

Dubbed the first lady of Riverland netball, Ms Gambling earned an Order of Australia Medal at this year's Australia Day awards, capping off her commitment to the sport

across several decades.

It was only fitting, everyone who has had the pleasure of working with Ms Gambling will tell you only positive things, and that you would fail to find a more deserving recipient.

Ms Gambling's commitment to netball in the region began way back in 1969 when she became a member of the RNA, with the league's liaison officer working with the Pioneer and 5RM.

Facing challenges along the way has been all part of the job for Ms Gambling across the years, most notably

helping Riverland netball make the switch to Friday nights.

She insisted that it would work, and not only has it now become a staple of the weekend schedule, it is actively thriving in the process.

Speaking on behalf of previous sports editors, she is nothing short of a lifesaver, helping gather up information from the weekend's clashes and ensuring we're up to date with everything going on in the sport.

If this is to be her last



2025 is set to be Riverland Netball liaison officer Wendy Gambling's last in the role.

season in the role, it is safe to say she will leave a massive hole in the netball community, and her impact on the Riverland community will be missed.

Whoever does step into her role will have enormous shoes to fill, but for at least season 2025, let's enjoy this remarkable woman while we have her.

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## Pelican eyes on sky-high rewards for 2025

**HUGH SCHUITEMAKER**

**Arguably Riverland soccer's most cohesive unit, Barmera United are hoping to set a foundation for years of success in 2025.**

The Pelicans finished the 2024 Riverland Soccer Association season as comfortable runners-up to Renmark Olympic, and suffered a 3-2 loss to Loxton in the Top Four Cup semi-finals, which many observers would have labelled an upset.

Senior men's coach Marty Barber said many players had been eager to hold extra preparations for the 2025 season.

"We started training earlier this season, compared to last season," Barber said.

"We've had a couple trial games, and we've been doing two compulsory

sessions a week, plus some extra stuff for those that want to do it.

"We've had people down there most nights of the week during some weeks, so there's quite a nice atmosphere building at the moment."

Barber said a number of Barmera's well-known senior names would return to help guide the side's younger players this season.

"We're starting to see improvements in training, and the trial games were handy to see how the team looks," he said.

"We've got quite a young team this year.

"We've got younger lads in Jude Bourton, Jesse Tsonis, Charlie van der Woude and Jack McCracken... and two of the boys back from Loxton in Crispin and Tony Mitchell, and they've brought Cooper Ebert with them too, who's a very-handly player.

"That's three big ins, and we have the same senior heads in the team."

Barber said maintaining positive attitudes throughout the season's challenging points would help the team's development for future years.

"It's feeling like it's a group coming through that could be dominant for a few years, depending on a lot of different factors of course," he said.

"It's always a team-first mentality for us.

"It will be important to try and stay as injury free as we can, because we've got a lot of quality, but not a massive squad, and because it's a young group, when things are challenging – which they will be – how we respond will be key.

"We're still building on the game plan, but we've brought in those extra couple players that will help it work a lot better, so I reckon we'll be moving the ball around quite well this year."

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Barmera United coach Marty Barber is optimistic a new-look senior men's squad can be successful for years to come.

PHOTO: Grant Schwartzkopff



# River Rangers on the improve in 2025?

**LACHLAN DAND**

**Following a difficult season 2024, the winds of change have swept through Berri River Rangers, and the new campaign is set to bring a high level of excitement.**

Last year saw the River Rangers' A grade men's side win just two matches, following the mid-season return of some of their star players.

Berri secured the first point of its season in round eight against Loxton in Renmark, finishing level at three-apiece with United.

However, the River Rangers' first win of the campaign came against local rival Barmera, in round nine, with a 3-1 win against the Pelicans.

A brace from star forward Josh Krendl was enough to get Berri over the line, while Francesco Vallelonga's 69th minute strike had the River Rangers in raptures.

Berri's second win of the season was left late against

Loxton, when an 89th minute winner from Leo Lucas found the back of the net.

There is little doubt that Berri will want to sure up its defence throughout 2025, following high-numbers conceded, particularly in the early stages of the season.

Renmark hit seven past the River Rangers in round one, as well as nine in round four, Loxton found the back of the net nine times in round two, while Barmera scored on six occasions in the third round.

Berri's defence showed greater resistance towards the latter part of the campaign, but were ultimately bundled out by two goals to nil against Olympic.

The River Rangers tasted success on grand final day last September, taking out the Top Four Cup in the under 16s competition, showcasing the high level of junior talent at the club.



Berri young gun Mitch Cawse produced an impressive campaign in the middle of the pitch for the River Rangers at both under 16s and A grade level in 2024. PHOTOS: Grant Schwartzkopff

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The River Rangers will be seeking to improve on last season's record.





## A team that never gives up

**HUGH SCHUITEMAKER**

**A new and experienced coach on the sidelines is set to support a fresh group of Loxton United Soccer Club (LUSC) players in their commitment to bringing success to the club.**

Loxton's A grade squad, often studded with young names that possess a 'nothing to lose' mentality, can often throw up surprises for opposition sides.

LUSC president Matt Perram said developing the skills of the team's younger players will again be a focus this season.

"Preparations are going well," Perram said.

"We have started training our seniors, and junior grades are doing some light pre-season training.

"Our senior numbers are looking pretty good. We will be playing a lot of youth, but have some experienced players in the mix.

"We are really concentrating on our youth over the next couple of years, focusing on building from grass roots up."

If the side can come into the new season with the same scoring prowess it displayed at times last year, successful results are likely to be on the cards. Loxton's wins in 2024 included 9-1, 6-4, and 4-0 wins against Berri, and a 4-0 win over Barmera, illustrating the team's potential when attacking toward goal.

After finishing the season third on the A grade ladder, with 17 points, Loxton's most-memorable win of 2024 though undoubtedly came in the Top Four Cup, with a gritty 3-2 triumph over Barmera that many onlookers would have labelled as an upset.

Perram said the appointment of Josh Sans as 2025 senior coach and football director had generated high levels of positivity among the club.

"We are excited to have a very experience player/coach who has joined the LUSC family," he said.

"He will bring a lot of experience and depth into our club, not only taking on the role of A grade coach but also in a football director role within our club, supporting the coaches, parents and youth from under 6 and up. We are very excited to have him commit to LUSC for season 2025 and beyond.

"We have had quite a few leave from last year, but in saying that we have some exciting players returning and some new players joining LUSC.

"Time will tell what our coach can get out of the players in our young, but enthusiastic senior teams. It will be a different season than 2024, but I am excited to see what we can achieve."

Loxton United will be hoping to build on the positive signs shown in 2024, when the side finished runners-up in the A grade Top Four Cup.





## Positive vibes key to Olympic's reign

**HUGH SCHUITEMAKER**

**Keeping players "committed", working hard and in high spirits are how Renmark Olympic aim to stay on top in 2025.**

Olympic will be seeking to replicate the heights of the previous year's campaign, which saw the A grade men's team lift both the Riverland Soccer Association premiership, and the Top Four Cup.

Returning A grade senior men's coach Daniel Clark said co-operation and positivity among all the club's teams was key to last season's success.

"The team and club as a whole was on a high after last year's success," Clark said.

"Especially as the A grade men, A grade women and B grade men took home the premiership and cup last season. All teams and players are keen to back it up this year if we can.

"Having a strong and committed squad was the key to winning the double

last year. When we were missing a few players through injury, we were able to call on some of our more experienced players and some youngsters to fill the void.

"The whole squad was on the same page from the first game to the last and we were lucky enough to get both the premiership and cup."

Clark said the majority of players from last year's campaign will feature for Olympic again this year.

"We have a few new faces this year, with a few players moving to the region for work," he said.

"Nearly all players from last year have committed to this year which is great for continuity.

"The strategy is to get a great bunch of guys together who are committed and hard



Renmark Olympic A grade men's coach Daniel Clark says maintaining positivity among his team will be crucial for success in 2025. PHOTOS: Grant Schwartzkopff

workers. Hopefully we can get some wins and have some fun along the way."

Clark said all opposition teams would pose their own unique challenges in the 2025 A grade season.

"Hopefully we can have some close and competitive games with all clubs this season," he said.

"Berri have an exciting young team and could cause a few surprises.

"Loxton are a bit of an unknown as there are rumours of a few departures and new signings.

"I also expect Barmera to be strong again this season with some returning players to the squad."



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Renmark's Linus Johnston took home best on ground honours in last season's Top Four Cup final.



## Loxton rebuilds itself

**SEBASTIAN CALDERON**

**Continued development and rebuilding will be the main focus for the Loxton Hockey Club's 2025 season, with the team looking to increased team cohesion to improve results.**

Loxton Hockey Club president Robin Schaefer said the Tigers were excited for the year ahead, and the numbers have been growing across all grades.

"Our club has been in a rebuilding and development phase for the last few years, and this focus will continue

for 2025," he said.

"Following our focus on rebuilding over previous years, in 2024 we started to see numbers in our lower junior grades beginning to increase, and in 2025 we are seeing this expand into the next junior grade age bracket, which is really encouraging.

"In 2024, one of our long-time B grade players of Indian origin approached us to support him in bringing a team of Indian expats into the B grade competition for 2025.

"We are thrilled to see this now eventuate and welcome these new players and their families into our club."

Last year saw Loxton merge with Renmark in some of the

junior grades, and Schaefer said the clubs are looking for a solution in the under 18s competition.

"This is still in discussion with our under 18 team, but in the grades below this we will have enough players to fill a side in each grade," he said.

"We are hoping to have both A men and A women's teams, two B men's teams, an under 14 mixed team, and an under 12 mixed team."

Loxton continues to improve its culture of success through previous years, and motivation has been a key part during training.

"We start with encouraging participation and fun with our junior members



rather than focusing on competition," Schaefer said.

"We are making a concerted effort to develop player, umpire and volunteer skills and the use of these skills throughout the club.

"We are also working on building the social side of our club at senior level through J Ball, and other local programs to increase exposure and participation.

"This provides more ways for people to enjoy the sport, creating a strong social component for the club and ensuring members feel connected."

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# Excitement is high at Berri

**LACHLAN DAND**

**Coming off of an extraordinary season in 2024, which featured premierships in the A grade men, under 18 girls, under 14 mixed, and under 12 mixed competitions, Berri is set to be a formidable Riverland hockey side once again.**

The Demons have become a force to be reckoned with in recent years, boasting strong numbers, and featuring in grand finals year after year, across many of their grades.

A lot of what Berri do, which enables success, can be traced back to the culture of the club, and president Brett Stokes said the Demons have a big focus on exactly that.

"It is early days to see what numbers we are going to get to the club this year, however, we have had

enquiries from new players, and excited past players that are looking forward to the 2025 season with teams in each grade," he said.

"The committee has been working hard in the off-season to put together our coaching staff, and continually promoting the game, and our club, for the season and beyond.

"We have been fortunate to already see junior success with Amahli Kelly, Logan Bowers and Charlize Camilleri recently making junior state teams.

"Every club wants to be successful in terms of premierships, but the culture we try to create at Berri is to facilitate each player to be their best and learn from the game, both on and off the field.

"We have some strong leaders at the club that are instilling confidence in our juniors to give it a go and reach their potential.

"If we manage to get the best out of the players by putting in the effort, we hope to then see the rewards of success."

Berri's junior numbers are a continual focus at the club, with the Demons acutely aware of the next generation coming through.

Team representation is high



Berri took home the 2025 A grade men's premiership, defeating Waikerie by three goals to nil in the grand final. FILE PHOTO

on the club's agenda at both Riverland and zone-based teams, and Stokes said the club is always looking to boost numbers, particularly in its younger grades.

"We are submitting teams for each junior grade and we have maintained most of our junior membership, but we are always looking to encourage any junior to come and give hockey a go," he said.

"Junior development is supported through our club coaches, and the oversight of development from Todd Kitto, however, we also encourage those players that seek higher performance to be involved, in both Riverland and zonal teams to seek their potential in the game.

"We hope to see more junior players involved in the representative side, both at regional and state level this year, and we as a club support them in any way we can to achieve their personal goals."

Berri is expected to be in the premiership conversations yet again, boasting star talent all over the pitch in several grades.

Yet, Stokes said he is

looking forward to seeing the game of hockey improve in the region on the whole, while keeping a keen eye on the Demons.

"I look forward to the Riverland competition getting stronger, and not necessarily just to do with the standard of the game," he said.

"To have a healthy membership for all clubs is the ultimate goal, and to make sure the sport is sustainable for years to come.

"The game of hockey is for any family member of all ages and abilities and we are so fortunate to have high level facilities and the ongoing support of the association.

"Obviously it would be remiss of me not to look forward to Berri Hockey Club members at both individual and team success.

"There are no major changes to our club, other than the appointment of Todd Kitto as our senior men's coach, and he will take over from Dan Shawyer, who will shift to an assistant during the season."

**BERRI HOCKEY CLUB**





# Renmark Hockey works to sustain a culture of success

**MADISON EASTMOND**

**Ensuring player numbers are sustainable remains a priority for Renmark Hockey Club this year.**

Renmark Hockey club representative Callum McNaughton said a number of junior teams would again merge with Loxton for the 2025 season.

"This is to help both clubs give kids an opportunity to play hockey," McNaughton said.

"Even though the numbers aren't as strong as we would hope, being able to do this gets the kids out on the hockey pitch (and) enjoying the game.

"Also, having some great coaches in

these grades, it would be a shame not to utilise their passion.

"This year we will be looking to enter the under 12s and under 14s mixed, under 18 women and men, and B (grade) women and men.

"Unfortunately there is no A (grade) men or women this year, but this is something we are looking to get back to filling in the future.

"However, we are looking forward to the future.

"From our come and try days, we have fresh faces coming to our juniors, and past players coming back for another year.

"But we are still welcome to anyone else who is wanting to come out and play."

McNaughton said receiving "a reinvestment of volunteering into the club" in 2024 was something they hoped to continue into the new season.

"They really make the magic work and it's what helps make the club great," he said.

"(We also want to) encourage more umpires to take to the whistle.

"It's another big step and puts people out of their comfort zone the first time, but really helps the game and their understanding when playing the game.

McNaughton said the Renmark Hockey Club would continue to build a sustained culture of success through "providing a fun and safe place for people to enjoy firstly playing hockey and enjoying the hockey community".

"Hockey is a smaller community, so you have the ability to get to know the people," he said.

"We have families with kids playing juniors and the parents playing seniors, it really is a family game.

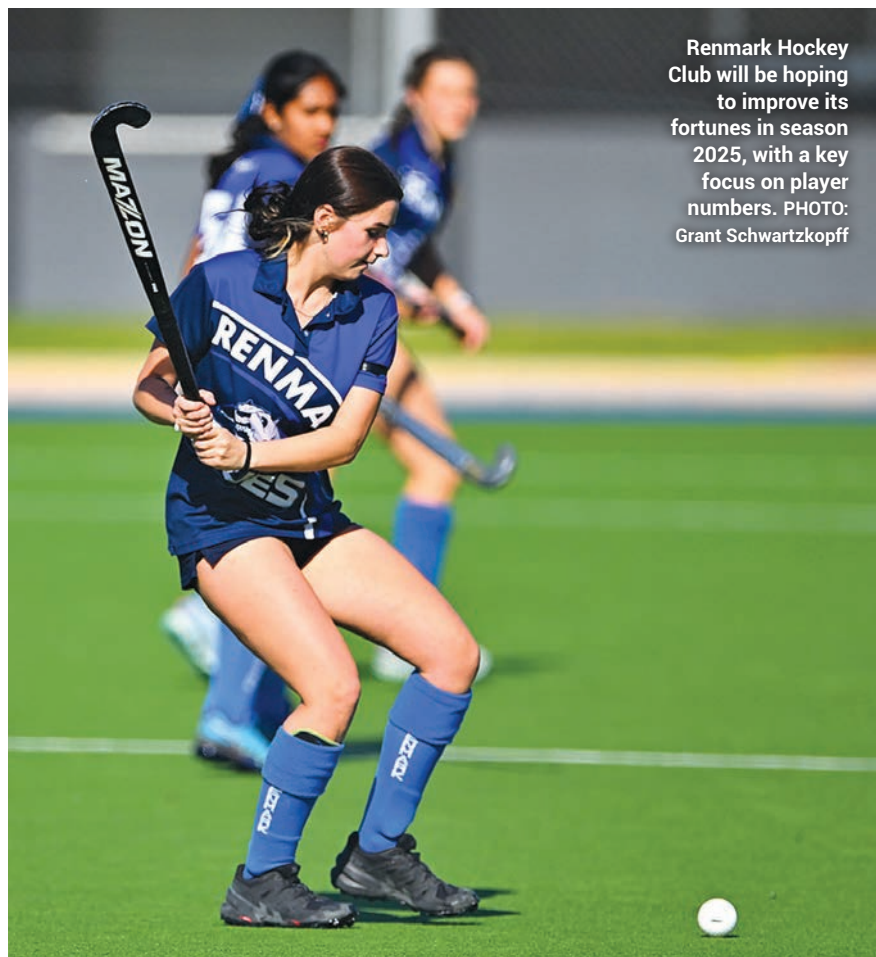
"(Additionally), we have coaches around that can pass on their knowledge and passion for the game.

"Really, they have the biggest effect on that success when they are bringing up players, and helping them with the game and the light-hearted conversations.

"The committee is also hands-on with everything in the club, being a smaller family sport.

"All of this aids in providing the grounds for a sustained culture in the club."

Renmark Hockey Club will be hoping to improve its fortunes in season 2025, with a key focus on player numbers. PHOTO: Grant Schwartzkopff





Waikerie's A grade women's hockey side will be hoping to improve following last season's semi-final loss to Sunraysia. PHOTOS: Grant Schwartzkopff



## Waikerie eager for victory

**CHRISTINE WEBSTER**

**The Waikerie Hockey Club is looking forward to a successful season after securing grand final berths for their A grade men and women teams and B grade men and women teams last year.**

In the Riverland A grade premierships, the Waikerie men lost to Berri, and the Waikerie women were defeated by Sunraysia.

The B grade men and women were both victorious on grand final day.

Waikerie Hockey Club president Vicki Schmidt said the A grade men will be changing their line up due to some of their players planning to leave the area for work opportunities.

"A couple of them want to have a break," she said.

"They have all been part of a tight-knit group since they were juniors and have all come through the ranks together.

"We will still have an A grade side this year, as we

have some young up-and-coming juniors coming through."

Schmidt said it would be good for these younger players to get some exposure in the A grade competition.

"Hopefully they will enjoy themselves and be a permanent fixture there for the next couple of years, so that we can develop them throughout the leadership group eventually," she said.

Schmidt said only minor changes were expected to the women's A grade team, with two players heading to Adelaide for university and work reasons.

She said last year's coach, Ryan Edwards, helped the A grade women make it to the premiership, which they lost to Sunraysia.

Schmidt said this team of young women have strong potential to do well in the



coming season.

"It is exciting, like the boys they have come through the junior ranks over the years" she said.

"They made the grand final last year, who knows what they could do this season."

Waikerie B grade men and B grade women are both keen to win another Riverland grand final.

The B grade teams consist of junior players who may be preparing to play A grade in the future, and senior players who may have previously played at the top level.

Schmidt said a lot of young talent was emerging in the club.

**“ They made the grand final last year, who knows what they could do this season.**



Trinity Schmidt zones in on a pass for the Knights in the A grade semi-final game last year against Sunraysia.



Lyn Wutke returns to coach Barmera in season 2025. PHOTO: Grant Schwartzkopff

## Wutke leading Barmera into new era

**LACHLAN DAND**

It is little secret that the Barmera Netball Club had a 2024 A1 season it would like to forget.

Winning just one game

under the stewardship of Jane Gartner, a young Barmera side were outclassed for large portions of the season. Ultimately, change was made for the lake-side club, and with a new season approaching Barmera

headhunted former coach, Lyn Wutke, for the top job.

Wutke said she is looking forward to returning to the coaching job, admitting it did come as a surprise.

"I actually haven't been out to as many trials as I would've liked... but I have had good reports," she said.

"We've got fairly good numbers, and everyone seems to be performing well, so it's going to be tough to make the final selection.

"There's a good mix of experience and youth, so we feel like we're in a good position.

"I didn't apply for the role as such, but having done it before, I've got the experience, and I thought I'd give it a go again."

Veteran player Sue Whitbourne showed her class for Barmera in 2024, as did goalkeeper Khaleisha Barnett at stages.

Youngsters Hallie Hodgson and Jemma Kassulke showed excitement at stages, and the pair will be key to Barmera's rise up the ladder this season.

Wutke is set to coach Barmera in both the A1 and A2 competitions, hoping to build a united group which can challenge for success.

"I've had a really good support group helping me with selections, and both teams will be strong, and I just thought I'd have a go with the talent that we do have," she said.

"Just having a close group is one of my biggest focuses, and having everyone working hard and supporting each other.

"I think it's better when you're playing similar styles, and everyone can be interchanged without too much difference.

"If someone's doing well they'll get an opportunity to play A1s and the structures will be the same, so everyone will know where they're at.

"We've got some talented juniors, and we've won a lot of premierships in recent seasons, so some are ready to come into the senior grades."

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**BARMERA**  
Netball Club



# Can Renmark return to glory?

## LACHLAN DAND

**Returning to the grand final heights it set itself in season 2023 will be a key focus for Renmark in this year's Riverland netball season.**

Following a disappointing fourth-place finish last season, which saw an elimination final exit at the hands of Berri, Renmark will be looking to improve this season.

Armed with a host of new players, the focus for second-year coach Tegan Moldovan's side is to continue being more competitive.

"Pre-season is travelling along nicely, and we held our trials earlier than usual this year so that we have had more time to work together as a squad," Moldovan said.

"The squad is looking really good so far, and our early court sessions are

showing great promise, especially from a number of juniors in this year's squad that are vying for starting positions.

"For us it's about encouraging our players to continually challenge and push themselves to be the best that they can be, so we need to provide a safe and supportive environment where they can take risks."

Team connection is high on the priority list this season, and while key player Georgia Kennedy has departed, Renmark will still be a difficult side to knock off, with the club holding the prospect of being involved in a home grand final.

"Our focus this year is about fostering a strong sense of community and teamwork within the squad where all players feel connected and valued, as well as supported to help build on their skills and knowledge, and to have fun," Moldovan said.

"We have lost Georgia to uni, and Reeni Blackley is still recovering from ankle

surgery at the end of last season, so fingers crossed we see her return to play at some stage.

"We also have a few key players returning after taking time away from netball, so we're very excited to see them back at the club, and in the A squad.

"Every player dreams of winning a premiership on their home court in front of their family, friends and supporters.

"I'm sure it's something that will provide that little bit of extra motivation for the girls."



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Loxton North will have to return to the 2025 finals series without reigning A1 best and fairest Ella Anderson, who has departed the Riverland. PHOTOS: Grant Schwartzkopff

## Things on the up for Loxton North

### LACHLAN DAND

**Responding to last season's incredible A1 grand final, that Loxton North happened to be on the wrong side of, was never going to be easy.**

A grand final that had to be seen to be believed saw North fall by a solitary goal in double overtime, after what was on the whole a successful season.

A1 head coach Renee Williams said while warm weather had impacted several of North's training sessions, her playing group are in good shape ahead of 2025.

"Unfortunately, the club has

had to cancel most of its planned pre-season nights due to the heat, so it has been a bit short," she said.

"Despite the heat challenges, the ladies took to the court for selections, looking fit and ready to kick off the season.

"It's hard to assess the squad at this stage, but we have an exciting mix of players from our 2024 A1 and A2 teams, along with some new faces and fresh but familiar Loxton North faces joining our squad."

Loxton North finished the 2024 A1 campaign with 10 wins, narrowly squeezing past Berri to earn a place in the decider.

Ella Anderson – who has now departed the Riverland – took out the A1 best and fairest award, while young guns Paris Lawrie and Maddie Groth were among those who impressed.

Williams said its about consistency for North in season 2025, as the group continues to build trust for the year ahead.

"Consistency, along with mental and physical fitness, and building trust and resilience within the team, will be essential elements of our season," she said.

"At North, we take pride in our strong, positive club culture, and we will continue to foster it moving forward.

"I believe a balance between playing hard and having fun is essential for both team success, and individual wellbeing.

"As a coach, I believe striving for a premiership is important, but the most valuable lesson is building resilience to overcome setbacks.

"In 2025, I will continue supporting the development of our talented junior netballers, which has been a passion of mine at North for quite some time.

"With the senior experience of Brooke Pietrolaj, Lori Sandland, Helen Schober, and Paris Lawrie, our young netballers will have experience and guidance across the court.

"Our A squad will also contribute to the club's goal of developing juniors by mentoring a junior team, offering guidance and support to both our young netballers and

their coaches.

"It's always priceless to see the littlest players at our club look up to and bond with the athletes they aspire to be."

Although North fell on the wrong side of last season's decider on the scoreboard, Williams is seeing the result as a learning opportunity for her group.

"While there was certainly an element of disappointment – a natural sign of passion – what we witnessed that Friday night was truly exceptional, and in my eyes, they were winners," she said.

"It was an outstanding display of determination, hard work, perseverance, sportsmanship, and immense talent from both teams. I've had many conversations about that night, and it gives me goosebumps every time.

"It's amazing and exciting to think that the Riverland has such strong netball talent, which I'm sure will be a topic of conversation for years to come.

"It was a grand final every netball enthusiast should watch and aspire to, and I have no doubt it will inspire all of the girls in our 2025 A squad."



Paris Lawrie is set to play a key role on the defensive end of the court yet again.

**Loxton North**  
NETBALL CLUB



# Tigers hungry for more success

## LACHLAN DAND

**It is a feat not achieved since way back in 1978, but this year the Loxton Netball Club's A1 side will be hoping to win its third premiership in a row.**

A force to be reckoned with over the previous two Riverland netball seasons, the Tigers have left little in their wake on the road to success.

Following an A1 premiership last year in an overtime stunner that had to be seen to be believed, second-year coach Jono Hartley is feeling positive about the season ahead.

"We've been flat out on the track, and we've had about 26 players register for trials in the A1 and A2 competitions this year, which is a massive number in netball.

"This year we'll select a squad again, and once that's done, we'll go through to our junior development programs, and that will assist in supporting those players in learning their netball.

"The girls are a pretty disciplined group in terms of motivation, and a lot of them actually took the basketball season off to recuperate and look after their bodies so they can go hard for the netball season without feeling worn out."

Boasting talent all over the court, Loxton finished 2024 undefeated, with star players such as Elise Lange, Aimee Holmes, Bailey Hahn, and Mackella Hogan among the best.

While some star power including Summer Smith and Jess Inglis will be stepping aside ahead of the upcoming campaign, Hartley is excited to see what his new recruits, and embedded players can produce.

"We've got a similar squad to last



Loxton took home the A1 premiership in 2024, defeating Loxton North in a thrilling grand final at The Precinct. PHOTOS: Grant Schwartzkopff

year, and although we have lost a couple, we've got some handy inclusions that have come into our squad for 2025 which I'm really looking forward to," he said.

"Our trainings have been a real test of mental endurance, and that's about seeing who can step up and show leadership within trying times.

"Our sessions have been of high intensity, and group dynamics, with the social side of things and becoming that one community.

"The girls have taken it all onboard and haven't put a foot wrong, which is awesome to see."

Loxton began its 2024 A1 campaign with a 27-goal win over Barmera, a 23-goal win in the Obst/Warneke Cup, an 11-goal win over Berri, and when it played Renmark in round nine, all opposition teams were defeated.

The biggest win of the season came in round 11, when the Tigers cruised through to a 40-goal win, showcasing the full power of the group.

For the second season in a row, Loxton will be the hunted team of the A1 competition, but Mr Hartley said it's something the group elects to not think about.

"We think about needing to be the best



Loxton captain Elise Lange produced another outstanding campaign last year, and will need to be at her best again if the Tigers are to make it three premierships on the trot.

team, and what it takes to be the best team," he said.

"You can have champions in your team, or you can be a team of champions, and we really want to be a team of champions, rather than have those one or two that stand out.

"It's not really about being the hunted for us, it's about what's best for our club and our netball journey, and the results will show through what we do.

"We'll have a highly competitive team, and be ready to take it on, and if we do have a loss we can use it as a learning curve."





Berri goal shooter Brooke Franks was a key piece to the team reaching the 2024 A1 preliminary final. PHOTOS: Grant Schwartzkopff



Young defender Amelia Morgan showcased her versatility last season, and will be important for Berri's aspirations this year.

## The build continues for Berri

### LACHLAN DAND

**Improvement was on show all season in 2024 for the Berri Netball Club, and as a new season dawns, the side wants to take the next step this year.**

Berri improved on its 2023 elimination final exit, but suffered heartbreak in the preliminary final last season, falling by one goal in the final second against Loxton North.

However, the group have been together for a long

time, and with youth prospects shining as bright as ever, the time is now for a premiership tilt.

Berri last won the A1 premiership in 2000, and head coach Kristy Reid said the response from her side has been good as the club hopes to break a 25-year premiership drought.

"We've got quite a few of our players from last year back which is lovely, and there's a few new faces too," Reid said.

"We're hoping to bring a few more juniors in this year, and that's something we're really high on this year which is

nothing different.

"If they're not playing we like to have our train on players so they're getting that experience with the seniors before they hit the court.

"That A2 grand final was amazing, and I don't think anyone is going to forget that grand final for quite a while because it was so fantastic to watch

"For the junior players to be stepping up like that... it's always good to have something to work towards, and when you have players of that age and calibre winning a grand final, how do they not want to stick around, so we'll keep building."

Berri won four games in the A1 from a possible 12 in season 2024, before moving swiftly past Renmark in the elimination final.

However, the challenge is to find consistency, and Reid said her group is as

motivated as ever before.

"Berri is one of those towns where we see a lot of girls come and go because we have a lot of government workers and that type of thing in our town," she said.

"Often, we don't have that stability of the same team two or three years in a row, but it helps knowing we've got pretty much the same this year.

"That way we can move past the 'getting to know each other' phase, and all of the other little basics, and we can get straight into netball.

"To go down by that one goal in that final means we know we're there, so it's about pulling it all together now, and we're really excited.

"If you've got each other's backs, the other team can tell and you feed off of that so there's certainly a focus on camaraderie.

"The players have to bring out the best in each other, and when they can do that, you know you're on a winner, so that's going to be a big focus."

**Berri**

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## Air of optimism at Waikerie

**CHRISTINE WEBSTER**

**The Waikerie Netball Club is expecting to have a whole new combination of players to play at the A grade level of the Riverland competition this season.**

Last year the club was unable to form an A1 team due to a shortage of players, but competed in the A2 competition.

Waikerie Netball Club president Michelle Burns said during March it was often hard to determine the field and number of players available for the approaching season.

"We have a few new faces in

the seniors this year, which will be lovely to see and some are new to town," she said.

"But we have also lost a few players due to injuries they experienced last year."

Burns said the Waikerie A2 team performed better last year than previous years.

"We won more games than we did in previous seasons," she said.

Burns said the junior grades were looking promising for Waikerie this year and hopefully an under 17s team could be formed.

She said some of these players had the potential to play in the A or B grade teams.

Past A grade players, Rachel Sparrow and Julia Golding

played in the B1 competition last year, which missed out on the grand final after losing to Loxton North.

Burns said last year's under 17 players who played in the B1 team gained valuable experience and hopefully they would be able to contribute to the A and B grade teams this season.

She said Waikerie could experience an interesting season this year given the availability and kind of players on offer.

Burns said new recruits were always welcome.

"The juniors seem to be overtaking the seniors at the moment, which is a little bit sad," she said.

"We would love to see some more senior players come



out and join us and have some fun on the court."

Burns said volunteers were also being sought to assist at games during the season.

"We have a few new faces on the committee and some younger ones that will hopefully give us a chance to revive and pursue some new ideas," she said.

"We are always looking for people to come out and cook a barbeque or time or score and make it possible for the girls to play on a Saturday.

"You don't have to be a parent, you could be a grandparent or an auntie or uncle."

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# RFL ALL GRADES DRAW 2025

<b>1 SATURDAY 26 APRIL</b>	Waikerie v Loxton Loxton North v Renmark Barmera-Monash v Berri
<b>2 SATURDAY 3 MAY</b>	Renmark v Barmera-Monash Loxton v Berri Waikerie v Loxton North
<b>3 SATURDAY 10 MAY</b>	Barmera-Monash v Waikerie Berri v Renmark Loxton North v Loxton (Proud Cup)
<b>4 SATURDAY 17 MAY</b>	Berri v Loxton North Barmera-Monash v Loxton Renmark v Waikerie (Gill/Lehmann Cup)
<b>5 SATURDAY 24 MAY</b>	Loxton v Renmark Waikerie v Berri Loxton North v Barmera-Monash
<b>6 SATURDAY 31 MAY</b>	Loxton v Waikerie Renmark v Loxton North Berri v Barmera-Monash (Fisher Cup)
<b>BYE SATURDAY 7 JUNE</b>	<b>INTERLEAGUE V BLG</b>
<b>7 SATURDAY 14 JUNE</b>	Barmera-Monash v Renmark Berri v Loxton Loxton North v Waikerie
<b>8 SATURDAY 21 JUNE</b>	Waikerie v Barmera-Monash Renmark v Berri Loxton v Loxton North
<b>9 SATURDAY 28 JUNE</b>	Loxton North v Berri Loxton v Barmera-Monash Waikerie v Renmark
<b>10 SATURDAY 5 JULY</b>	Renmark v Loxton Berri v Waikerie Barmera-Monash v Loxton North
<b>BYE SATURDAY 12 JULY</b>	<b>SA COUNTRY CHAMPIONSHIPS</b>
<b>11 SATURDAY 19 JULY</b>	Waikerie v Loxton Loxton North v Renmark Barmera-Monash v Berri
<b>12 SATURDAY 26 JULY</b>	Renmark v Barmera-Monash Loxton v Berri Waikerie v Loxton North
<b>13 SATURDAY 2 AUGUST</b>	Barmera-Monash v Waikerie Berri v Renmark Loxton North v Loxton
<b>14 SATURDAY 9 AUGUST</b>	Berri v Loxton North Barmera-Monash v Loxton Renmark v Waikerie
<b>15 SATURDAY 16 AUGUST</b>	Loxton v Renmark Waikerie v Berri Loxton North v Barmera-Monash
<b>16 SATURDAY 23 AUGUST</b>	Loxton v Waikerie Renmark v Loxton North Berri v Barmera-Monash
<b>SATURDAY 30 AUGUST</b>	
2ND SEMI FINAL @ Berri	
<b>SUNDAY 31 AUGUST</b>	
1ST SEMI FINAL @ Barmera-Monash	
<b>SATURDAY 6 SEPTEMBER</b>	
PRELIMINARY FINAL @ Loxton	
<b>MONDAY 8 SEPTEMBER</b>	
WHILLAS MEDAL	
<b>SATURDAY 13 SEPTEMBER</b>	
GRAND FINAL @ Renmark	



# MVFNL ALL GRADES DRAW 2025

## 1 SATURDAY 26 APRIL

Murrayville v Brown's Well  
Wunkar v Sedan Cambrai  
Paringa v BSR

## 2 SATURDAY 3 MAY

Sedan Cambrai v Ramco  
BSR v Murrayville  
Brown's Well v Wunkar

## 3 SATURDAY 10 MAY

Murrayville v Paringa  
Ramco v Brown's Well  
Wunkar v BSR

## 4 SATURDAY 17 MAY

Brown's Well v Sedan Cambrai  
Paringa v Wunkar  
BSR v Ramco

## 5 SATURDAY 24 MAY

Murrayville v Brown's Well  
Wunkar v BSR

## 6 SATURDAY 31 MAY

Wunkar v Murrayville  
BSR v Sedan Cambrai  
Paringa v Ramco

## BYE SATURDAY 7 JUNE

LONG WEEKEND BYE

## 7 SATURDAY 14 JUNE

Sedan Cambrai v Paringa  
Brown's Well v BSR  
Ramco v Murrayville

## 8 SATURDAY 21 JUNE

Paringa v Brown's Well  
Wunkar v Ramco  
Murrayville v Sedan Cambrai

## 9 SATURDAY 28 JUNE

Brown's Well v Ramco  
Paringa v Wunkar  
BSR v Sedan Cambrai

## 10 SATURDAY 5 JULY

BSR v Paringa  
Sedan Cambrai v Wunkar  
Brown's Well v Murrayville

## BYE SATURDAY 12 JULY

SA COUNTRY CHAMPIONSHIPS

## 11 SATURDAY 19 JULY

Ramco v Sedan Cambrai  
Murrayville v BSR  
Wunkar v Brown's Well

## 12 SATURDAY 26 JULY

BSR v Wunkar  
Paringa v Murrayville  
Brown's Well v Ramco

## 13 SATURDAY 2 AUGUST

Sedan Cambrai v Paringa  
Ramco v Murrayville

## 14 SATURDAY 9 AUGUST

Sedan Cambrai v Brown's Well  
Wunkar v Paringa  
Ramco v BSR

## 15 SATURDAY 16 AUGUST

Sedan Cambrai v BSR  
Paringa v Ramco  
Murrayville v Wunkar

## 16 SATURDAY 23 AUGUST

BSR v Brown's Well  
Murrayville v Ramco  
Paringa v Sedan Cambrai

## 17 SATURDAY 30 AUGUST

Brown's Well v Paringa  
Sedan Cambrai v Murrayville  
Ramco v Wunkar

## SATURDAY 6 SEPTEMBER

SEMI FINALS @ Brown's Well

## SATURDAY 13 SEPTEMBER

PRELIMINARY FINAL @ Paringa

## SATURDAY 20 SEPTEMBER

GRAND FINAL @ Blanchetown

# GRANT'S BEST WINTER SPORTING SNAPS FROM 2024

The Precinct held its breath on the final second of double overtime of the 2024 A1 grand final when Loxton's Mackella Hogan put up what would be the winning goal.



Local rivals Berri and Barmera-Monash faced off in the RWFL grand final in 2024.



Berri livewire Regan Kruger got RFL fans excited in round six with a soaring mark attempt.

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Loxton's Liam Richardson was again a shining light for the Tigers last year, showing his creativity with the ball.



Renmark and Loxton United met in last year's A grade men's Top Four Cup grand final.





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RZ14109



# New direction planned for RFL

**LACHLAN DAND**

**Potential expansion and sustainability of the women's game are among the focuses for the newly appointed independent chairperson of the RFL.**

One of the most highly sought after vacant positions in the Riverland has been filled, following the appointment of an independent chairperson to the RFL.

Bruce Gehling won the race to the position, bringing a wealth of experience with him having previously coached at RFL club Berri, among several professional positions including at SAPOL, and with the Berri Hotel as its operations manager, and a board member of SANFL club North Adelaide.

Now retired and living in Waikerie, Gehling said his passion for country football was a key factor in accepting the position.

"Once I moved back to the Riverland, a few people spoke to me and over the last few years I haven't had a lot to do with footy, but now I've retired I've got more time on my hands," Mr Gehling said.

"A few people chatted to me, and with Henry Crawford having to vacate the role, I saw it as a good opportunity to be active and really involved in footy.

"This role sort of allows me to do things and put forward ideas that will hopefully be able to assist the overall longevity of RFL clubs."

Winds of change have swept through the Riverland Football League in recent years, most notably via the creation of the Murray Valley Football Netball League, meaning the Independents were removed from the league's banner.

Mr Gehling said he will put in place the necessary steps required to help the RFL flourish in every possible form.

"Everyone knows that country football is a battle, and so my plan will be to do

what we can as an overseeing league in helping the clubs stay buoyant," he said.

"Whether that be through advisor assistance or guidance, or direction from the SANFL, it's about keeping the clubs strong.

"We have to keep the relationships open with the clubs in regards to finances, and we can sustain what we've got.

"Perhaps after the settling period of 12 months we can have a look at the potential for expansion, and see whether that's required or available, or we can just consolidate with what we've got and keep enhancing that."

Mr Gehling is open to anything in the league, and expansion is certainly on that list, with the new independent chair open to adding to the six RFL clubs.

"Six teams is an interesting number, and it is workable, but perhaps growing to that is the key for helping us to continue surviving in the future," he said.

"I haven't got any specific thoughts on it at the moment, and there's no planning in place at the moment, but to survive you have to grow.

"Whether that's growth in the clubs we've already got, or in numbers, there are football clubs out there always looking for a home.

"If the RFL is strong player-and-management-wise, I think it may be a viable destination for some clubs that are looking for a league to call home."

Women's football in the Riverland continues to be one of the league's main challenges, with its sustainability continually brought into question.

In 2024, just Barmora-Monash, Berri, and Loxton North competed, with North combining with Loxton, Waikerie, and Renmark to help field a side.

The Rovers pulled out of the season just weeks before the opening round, with the league also operating a Thursday night fixture each week.

Mr Gehling said women's football is

going to be high on his agenda, with the league open to new ideas.

"Some immediate decisions need to be made in relation to senior women's football and what way we go with it... due to the lack of players in the Riverland willing to play football," he said.

"That's going to evolve over the next few weeks, and we'll be seeking feedback from the clubs in terms of what they're able to put on the park senior-wise.

"Junior-wise, hopefully we'll be able to gain assistance from the SANFL around growing the product, because it's no use having a competition if we don't have a competition.

"We need to focus on the seniors first and foremost and how we plan that, and then our focus will shift to the junior programs to make sure we have a viable system in place.

"Our challenge is making footy something that young people want to be involved in, and we have to keep it fun to keep the juniors coming through, otherwise we're in big trouble, so it's definitely a key focus."

Gehling held the top job at Berri in the early 2000s, helping take the club to a successful position on the RFL ladder before the Demons ultimately broke through for premiership success in 2010.

Gehling said he believes his background at club land will help him flourish in this role, understanding what each club requires from the league to set itself up for success.

"I've got a knowledge of RFL football, and when I arrived at Berri we were struggling a little bit, but we were able to structure a few things and add to our playing list," he said.

"I had a really good relationship with the committee there, and although I never had major involvement with the RFL, having a knowledge of club footy, which I've had in a number of country clubs, I think it will only help me in this role."



Loxton North will be hoping to take the next step this year, and ultimately leap into top four calculations.  
PHOTOS: Grant Schwartzkopf

## Panthers' time to pounce?

**LACHLAN DAND**

**It has been a welcome change of pace this off-season for Loxton North, compared to the chaos the opening months of 2024 brought about.**

The beginning of last year saw a change of coach in February at Panther Park, and when Dave Higgins accepted the role, and guided North to a 2-0 start, the Panthers' supporters were optimistic.

Yet, injuries and unavailability loomed over Loxton North, and before

long, it was sitting in the bottom two, and ultimately found itself out of the finals race.

However, with a year of the Riverland Football League now under his belt, Higgins believes the fortunes are changing for a side hoping to win its first A grade premiership since 2015.

"It's all looking pretty good, and everything is going well from a fitness point of view, and the numbers have been good on the track, so we're pretty happy with the way things have gone," he said.

"It's no question that we're in a better position than what we were this time last year, and I've certainly built relationships over the past 12 months, and this allows you to build on them.

"It's about improving how you work with the squad, and how you work with individuals, so the additional 12 months have certainly been a bonus."

The winds of change are again set to sweep across Panther Park, this time from a playing point of view, as North shifts its list profile around.

Experience is set to be at the front of mind for

Higgins' group, hoping to move into the final four this season.

"We're going to have quite a sizable change in our squad, both physically and age wise this year," Higgins said.

"The game plan is still a little bit up in the air, because I haven't actually seen a few of the new recruits play, so it's a bit of a wait and see as to what best fits, and what the best balance is.

"I don't feel fitness was the issue last year, I think it might have been the adrenaline of the off-season, but we were found out by some pretty good teams.

"We're just hoping that we're better set up this year from a game style and personnel point of view, to make sure we take that next step.

"We want to be pushing our way up the ladder and improving every year, but every other club is the same, so we just need to take it as it comes."

Loxton North finished on five wins last season, ultimately three games out of the finals series, but major scalps were claimed along the way.



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# LOXTON NORTH PANTHERS

A round nine win over the Tigers at Panther Park gave North supporters the belief of finals, yet just one more win was managed for the season.

The issue for Loxton North in 2024 was one of consistency, but with a host of changes, Higgins believes his side have turned a corner with high competition for spots.

"We're just trying to improve on what we did last year, and improve week-to-week, and be as competitive as we can against different types of opposition," he said.

"While we've gained some recruits, we've lost some real quality as well, but I hope what we put in place last year, giving kids some experience, really works well for us this year.

"Work ethic and team performance is what it's all

about, and in a game like ours you need to bring that each and every week.

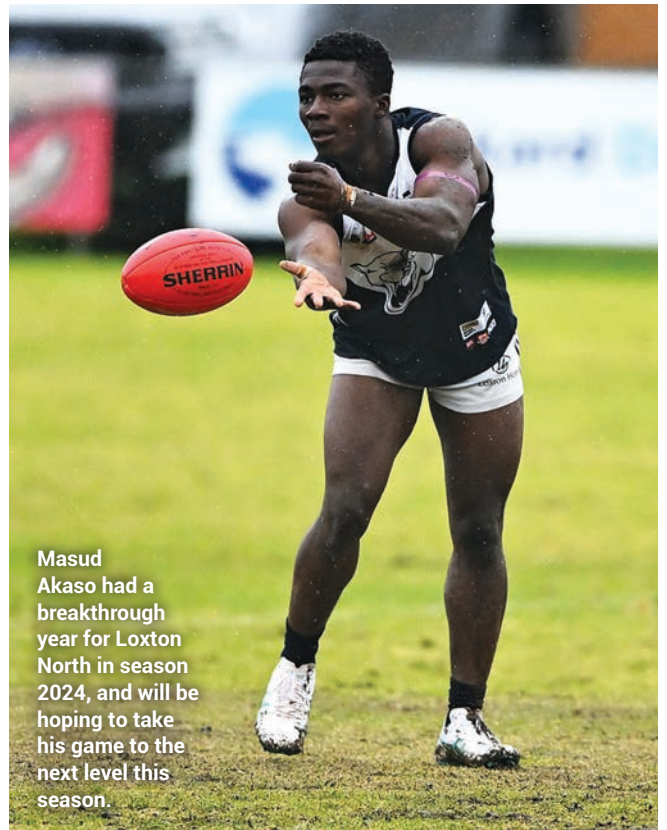
"That can be the challenge every week coaching young teams, but hopefully the experience some of them got last year will hold them in good stead, and it's onwards and upwards from here."

## KEY INS:

Jarrold Buckley, James Neale, Brok Obst.

## KEY OUTS:

Zac Wooldridge, Alek Kudra, Caleb Koehne.



Masud Akaso had a breakthrough year for Loxton North in season 2024, and will be hoping to take his game to the next level this season.

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Cooper Mackereth celebrates a goal for Waikerie on a wet afternoon against Berri in round 10 last season.



Jake Spencely was a welcome return for Waikerie in 2024, and is primed for another strong season. PHOTOS: Grant Schwartzkopff

## Magpie eyes on the grand prize

**LACHLAN DAND**

**An up-and-down season 2024 for the Waikerie Magpies resulted in a preliminary final exit, marking change in the coaching department.**

Appointing favourite son Jackson Sutton as its A grade coach last October, a sense of optimism surrounds Waikerie, as it embarks on its newest era.

Now with a brand-new building, and the reigning Whillas Medallist at their disposal, it's exciting times for the Magpies.

Sutton said he is looking forward to assuming the head coaching reigns, with the Pies putting in a strong pre-season so far.

"There's decent numbers on the track, and the summer can be difficult because some people are doing harvest at the moment," he said.

"The boys are really motivated, and you've got your core group of A grade players who are ready for success again, because it has been a few years now.

"A lot of the 25-year-olds haven't experienced an A grade premiership again, so they're all super keen to try

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and rectify that.

"It's a very-young list, but that's exciting because they have a lot of energy, and things are shaping up really well.

"We lost a fair-few players from last year, but at the moment we've worked to get some locals back, so we think we've got the right mix of players."

Sutton is a seven-time premiership player for Waikerie, and recently spent time as the playing coach of the club's B grade affiliate.

Sutton coached the Magpies' reserves to glory in 2023 on home deck, and with his side possessing some of the most attacking players in the Riverland, the Magpies want to take their game to a new level.

His experience with the club is set to shine in season 2025, with Waikerie hoping to be the most attacking side in the competition.

"One of the biggest driving forces of the pre-season has been about having a bit of spark playing footy again," he said.

"It's a style that probably can work against you at some points, but I still think it's a style we should all incorporate, so that the people coming to watch on Saturday see an exciting game.

"For me, that means kicking more goals, which I'm a big believer in, and that's the way we'll go about it.

"Of course, there will be times where we'll have to batten down the hatches and play a bit smarter, but overall, my message will be that we want to play aggressive football.

"It's not exactly a fresh face coming into the role because I have been around the club for so long, but hopefully I've got the



Waikerie will be hoping to improve on last year's preliminary final exit, with new coach Jackson Sutton at the helm.

respect from a majority of people.

"I want to catapult these blokes into having success, and I think it only takes one taste of it and you definitely want more, and that's what made Waikerie so successful for a long period of time."

Kade Hilton became the fourth-youngest Whillas Medallist last September, with the dynamic young midfielder also showing his class in attack.

Alongside him, Jarrad Bee produced a strong season in the middle of the ground, while Tristan Geehman again gave the Magpies driving force out of the back half.

Waikerie fell against Renmark at the kennel by 17 points in last year's preliminary final in a contested game of football, with the Magpies ultimately outclassed.

Sutton said he believes his group can go to the next level this year, with Waikerie widely expected for another finals campaign.

"Although we have lost a

couple, we've got some younger players coming through, so getting those boys into the senior system will be hugely beneficial as well," he said.

"I'm hoping they can lift us to the next level, but we do need to make sure our older blokes can stay injury free.

"If we can stay injury free, there's no reason we can't be near the top, but we are going to have to improve to match it with

those top sides.

"You need to have that burning in the back of your mind, so being switched on against the best teams in the league is a good thing."

## KEY INS:

Thomas Truscott, Bradley Truscott, Ryan Turner.

## KEY OUTS:

Tom Sheldon, Byron Sumner, Sam Chambers, Zach Still, Mitch Hahn, Jackson Pillion.



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## Demons on the rise in 2025

### LACHLAN DAND

It is no secret the Berri Football Club have been on one of the leanest patches in the history of the

### RFL throughout the modern era.

Despite holding the most premierships in the competition, Berri's last A grade flag came back in 2010, and the Demons have

only been back to the finals six times since.

Additionally, the club has the last two wooden spoons, winning just two games of its last 31, so the time for change is now.

Brenton Woolston's guidance only lasted one season, and the Berri Football Club appointed Henry Labastida last October.

The new leader of the Demons, who joined the playing group at the midway point of 2024, said he is excited for the challenge in front of him.

"Everyone is fit and ready to go, and the signs from our trial matches have been really positive, and we're just going through things that we want to improve for this year," he said.

"We want to make sure the boys are enjoying playing footy together, and bringing local boys back to the club alongside some experience can lift the boys up a bit more.

"We want to be strong and united when things get tough, and have a positive attitude and learn from the last couple of years and get out of that mindset.

"We just need to focus on what we want to achieve, and the way we want to play, and have fun."

Berri last played finals in 2022, falling to Loxton by eight points in the elimination final, but its last victory was the 2010 premiership.

So, with the unwanted statistic of no finals wins stretching into a 15th season, Labastida is tasked with guiding the Demons back to their glory days.

"I love finals footy, and that's what we play for, but speaking to the club, we have to make sure our fundamentals and our foundations are strong," he said.

"Looking forward to the next couple of years is a major thing to make sure the club is in good hands, and building a strong senior core who will stick around for a couple of years.

"Having Shay Hawkins who is one of our senior boys coach the under 18s is going to help build that connection with them.

"That was an under 18s side who made the grand final last year, so those guys will certainly get a taste of

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senior level, and get them to be consistent in coming years.

"Our leadership group are really leading the way for the other boys to come through, and making sure the under 18s are training hard.

"The feedback I've received has been that the vibes are up, and the sheer number of players coming to training is high, which is good to see."

Berri snapped a two-year long losing streak in July last year in a thrilling one-point round 12 win over Loxton North.

The Demons backed that up with a stunning Fisher Cup win, in Barmera, the following week, and it appeared they had turned a corner.

However, Berri finished the year with three-straight

defeats, but intriguingly, were competitive in a bulk of the 16 home-and-away matches.

Labastida said the willingness to get stuck into round one, with the Demons starting off against grand finalists Barmera-Monash, is through the roof.

"Like all of the other clubs, you don't know what to expect until the season starts, because you don't know what the other clubs have recruited," he said.

"It's going to be exciting for us to see where we're at, but

at this stage we're happy, and it's a positive feeling at training at the moment.

"It's always good to have a different insight, and trying to bring what I learned from Darwin to here, but you are at a disadvantage when you don't know about the players and have to build relationships.

"For me it's a case of so

far, so good, and everyone has appreciated what I'm putting into the club, and I've got great assistant coaches behind me who have helped and guided me through this stage."

## KEY INS:

TBA.

## KEY OUTS:

Angus Dayman.



Rory Moroney impressed Berri supporters in the latter stages of season 2024, working through the middle and across half forward. PHOTOS: Grant Schwartzkopf



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Loxton produced a rousing fourth quarter performance to reclaim the Proud Cup against Loxton North in round four last season.  
PHOTO: Supplied

## Tigers alive for 2025

### LACHLAN DAND

**Holding the longest A grade premiership drought in the Riverland Football League, a sense of unrest is growing at Loxton.**

The Tigers last tasted the ultimate success in 2006, and despite being a regular feature of the final four, a new era is underway at Tigerland.

Last October saw Loxton replace playing coach Luke Harder, who's side were bounced out in last year's elimination final, with Loxton North junior Nathan Brown.

Brown most recently spent time in Karoonda, and the playing coach is excited for his first season coaching in the region.

"At this stage everything is looking really good, and training has been fantastic, and we've had a really good response from the guys," he said.

"I feel like we're in a really good spot,

and we're having good numbers on the track, and everyone's looking healthy, so things are positive so far.

"I'm pretty old fashioned, and for me there is no substitute to hard work, so for me it's about making sure that every session we do we're training really hard.

"We're trying to get something out of each session, and continue to get better by developing as a team, so that's been my main message.

"I'm very big on having a team-orientated style of play, so we're making sure we're doing what we can for each other and ourselves to benefit the team."

Loxton have an exciting, young playing group, and although important players such as Rogan Kennedy and Will Gutsche have departed, Brown said he is excited about the side.

That, plus the opportunity to continue his coaching career, is what drew the 31-year-old to Tigerland, with Loxton looking to build on last year's



elimination exit.

"I had some chats with some other clubs around the place, but with Loxton I was really drawn to the fact that I can continue on as a head coach," he said.

"The plus side is that they've got a really talented young group, and they're only going to excel and get better this season.

"We've got some really good leaders among that too, who I've known for a while and played a bit of footy against as well.

"It's a very positive look on this season and moving forward, and I feel as though I have a good ability to gel with the young guys, as well as the older guys.

"It's looking very good at this stage,



and hopefully we can see some success on the field, and look to develop the guys coming through the under 15s and under 18s and get them playing senior football as soon as possible.

Loxton supporters strapped in for a rollercoaster season in 2024, with highs and lows present right from the word go.

The Tigers started with a round one win over Berri, and claimed the Proud Cup in round four following a stirring last quarter.

Yet the best win of its season came in round five – defeating eventual premier Renmark at the kennel – as well as defeating grand finalists Barmera-Monash in round 12.

However, inconsistencies pushed the Tigers into fourth place, with losses against Waikerie on three occasions, as well as a disappointing round nine loss at Panther Park.

To enjoy success in season 2025, Loxton will be looking for more consistent football, and that has been

a key focus for Brown this summer.

"Everyone's really hungry and you can just tell that on the training track with what we've been doing has been awesome," he said.

"It's a credit to the guys because they just keep rocking up every week, and you can definitely see there's a hunger there.

"A lot of them feel that last year they left a few stones unturned, and didn't finish as well as they could have.

"Injuries played a big part, but we've managed to do some really good

recruiting, and the younger guys that were playing good A grade footy last year have gone to another level this pre-season.

"I'm very happy with the list we have, and I'm confident that we can be playing finals again, and look to go a lot deeper."

#### KEY INS:

Nathan Brown, Terrence Wilfred.

#### KEY OUTS:

Rogan Kennedy, Will Gutsche, Lachlan Evans.



Defender Che Lange showed his importance and versatility down back last year, finishing in The Murray Pioneer's Team of the Year. PHOTO: Grant Schwartzkopff



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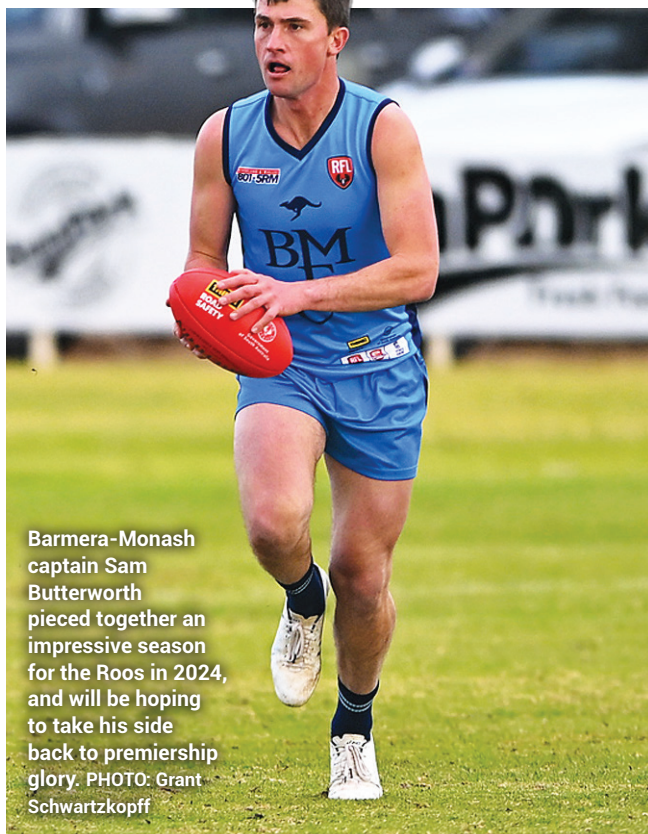
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Barmera-Monash captain Sam Butterworth pieced together an impressive season for the Roos in 2024, and will be hoping to take his side back to premiership glory. PHOTO: Grant Schwartzkopff

## Can the Roos bounce back?

**LACHLAN DAND**

**If it could have grand final day back, there is little doubting A grade coach Fraser Sampson and the Barmera-Monash Football Club would snap at the opportunity.**

Dominating all year, the 2023 premiers cruised through to the minor premiership, rarely faulting, despite a two-game slide in the middle of the year, largely due to injuries.

Aside from that, the Roos left little in their wake last year, winning 13 games, and winning straight through to the grand final in a second semi-final that was one of the games of the year.

Yet, everyone is back to square one as a new season dawns, and with the slate being wiped clean from 2024, excitement is building at the Lakeside.

"There is certainly an element of hunger from the senior teams that lost the grand finals," Sampson said.

"Numbers have been relatively consistent, but slightly down on last year, but this time of year is tricky

with summer sport finishing up.

"The under 18 group and those coming up to seniors this year have been really consistent with their training, and I'm looking forward to seeing their development throughout the year.

"Going into my third year with the club, I'm really looking to build on the foundation of the past two seasons.

"We have worked hard on creating a strong culture, and hopefully we can continue to improve both on and off the field."

As a club, the Roos earned a special club achievement in 2024 – making the grand final in all six grades.

Although Barmera-Monash won just the under 18s and under 15s grand finals, the Roos set the standard across their football club.

Captain Sam Butterworth leads the under 15s, helping foster the next generation, Steve Marks won the club back-to-back under 18s premierships, and Kayla Mudge has been a pioneer of women's football, so the signs are there for Barmera-Monash to be successful yet again.

A grade boss Sampson said season 2024 taught the club about hard work, with the Roos seeming connected as a club on the whole.

"Last year taught us that whole club buy-in is crucial," he said.

"Across the club, everyone was all in, and it really showed in the way we

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played, and we managed to get all teams in the grand finals.

"It's always important to look for ways to improve, and we certainly have plenty of areas that we want to get better in.

"I try to have really clear messaging around what we are trying to achieve, and make sure we place more emphasis on the process, rather than the outcome.

"We want to be the most-connected group, and we want to develop the offensive side of our game as a result."

Adapting to change is key for every sporting club, but that rings true for not many others louder than Barmera-Monash this year.

Although recruiting well – headlined by Steve Burton – who will be in conversations



as the best footballer in the Riverland, the Roos have been gutted.

Often priding itself on defence across the past two years, which has been the catalyst for success, Barmera-Monash will be missing key defensive pillars this year.

Tall defensive duo Aedan Lyon and Luke Thomas have departed, while veteran midfield bulls, and stalwarts of the club, Jake Smith and Ben Drogemuller,

are also out.

Importantly, Barmera-Monash have retained a bulk of its scoring power, with Jono Beech, Matt Wutke, and Mitch Wellington donning the double blue again.

Captain Butterworth will steer the midfield ship, with pacey winger Paul Spilios on the outside, and reigning best and fairest Justin Bonney possess class down back.

The Roos have the tools to

go back to the top of the mountain, and the grand final burn of last year should be strong enough to have them in premiership calculations once again.

## KEY INS:

Steve Burton, Will Cowling, Ben Bryant.

## KEY OUTS:

Jordyn Freeman, Jake Smith, Ben Drogemuller, Luke Thomas, Aedan Lyon, Sam Vanderwoude.

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## Bark-to-bark on the cards for Rovers?

**LACHLAN DAND**

**Establishing itself as the most successful Riverland Football League club of the modern era, Renmark capped off a stunning 2024 season with another A grade premiership.**

Renmark has been a feature of the past six grand finals, taking home the flag in 2019, 2021, 2022, and 2024.

Following 2023's grand final loss, the Rovers will reassume the role of being the hunted side of the competition, with its star players and game style forensically analysed by the other five clubs.

Now with 18 premierships to its name, the Rovers will be keen to continue this golden era of success, and superstar playing coach Josh Vater said the motivation is high at the kennel again.

"Everyone's come back really well and all are looking fit, and they've all done their own thing over the off-season which is nice," he said.

"You do have some challenges over the summer every year with players in vintage or playing summer sport and you want everyone training, but for the most part everyone looks fit and healthy and raring to go, so we feel really confident.

"Because we've been so fortunate to be successful for a few years, we've been in a similar position, and it's not uncommon for us to be hunted by the competition.

"At the same time, from all reports

every club has had player changes, and some have had coach changes, so everyone will be thinking they'll be around the mark."

Renmark will host the RFL grand final in season 2025 for the first time since 2018 – an A grade defeat to Waikerie – and Vater said the prospect was significant.

With one of the most complete playing lists in the competition, Renmark is one of the premiership favourites, but the Rovers boss said its remaining level-headed for his group was important.

"It does seem to be a bit of a thing among the clubs, in a similar fashion to centenary years, because everyone wants to win at home," he said.

"I personally am yet to win a home grand final, so I'm unable to say if they're better than any other year, but to me, it doesn't matter where we play if we're fortunate enough to make it.

"If we're good enough to be there, and to win it, I don't care where we play, but from a club point of view, it's massive for the club and a lot goes in to making it special.

"There are so many things to do, and so much that can go both right and wrong between now and then, so there's no point in thinking about it."

One of the key sticking points of Renmark's 2024 campaign was its consistency, recording 12 wins for the season and just four losses.

The Rovers started the season with four wins on the trot, and despite a two-game slide, managed to recover



and at no stage slipped out of the top two, although both defeats came on home turf.

Highlights for Renmark included a round seven win at Waikerie for the Gill/Lehmann Cup, while its biggest winning margin came in round 14, at Berri – crossing triple figures.

Reflecting on the 2024 successes, Vater said he was pleased with the way his group responded to the challenges they faced last year, ensuring there will be no guarantees once again.

"Just like everyone else, we enter each season hoping, and expecting we'll be around the mark and challenging again," he said.

"There is an element of estimated guess work, but at the same time there is a little bit on hope too, because you don't know how other clubs are shaping up with player changes.

"Every year we'll have challenges, but that is why you play sport, because nobody wants any team to win or lose every game, and you want an even competition.

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Rovers midfielder Dan Woolford produced another consistent campaign last year, and will again be a key player in 2025.

PHOTOS: Grant Schwartzkopf



## RENMARK ROVERS

"Last year we were relatively healthy, and as a group we adapted pretty well based on where we were from the year before, and we looked to change some things too."

"There were times last year where we thought our offence was going well and our defence needed work, but there were other times where that was flipped."

"We were able to make adjustments on both sides of the coin mid-year, and that's what I see my role is as a coach."

Every RFL club is back to square one as the new season approaches, but the Rovers will be keen to start well.

Vater knows what he needs from his group as Renmark seek to climb the mountain with the star-studded list, with its healthy inclusions yet again.

"You're always looking to adjust and update and get better, and you're always hoping to get better and get more out of the group," he said.

"No doubt there will be some people coming up from the under 18s pushing



Renmark took home its fourth premiership in five seasons last year, defeating Barmera-Monash by 17 points in the decider.

for selection, and some other guys that played A grade might struggle.

"Healthy competition is something that is really important for any club, to keep everyone on their toes and working hard, and that comes down to performances on the training track and game day."

### KEY INS:

Lachlan Lellmann,  
Ben Kealy,  
Bryce Watson.

### KEY OUTS:

Steve Kahlon.



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## Can the Bombers break through?

**LACHLAN DAND**

**Scaling the mountain is never easy, but for the beginning two years of the Murray Valley Football Netball League (MVFNL), the Brown's Well Bombers have been the bridesmaids.**

The Bombers elected to make a change in the coaching box ahead of the upcoming campaign, appointing Nathan Francis as their newest boss.

Francis, the brother of Sydney Swans player Aaron, brings a wealth of experience to Paruna, plus exceptional football skills, and he is set to be a key asset to Bomberland.

Brown's Well finished the 2024 home and away

season with nine wins, resulting in a third-place finish on the ladder.

The Bombers started the season with back-to-back defeats from Sedan-Cambrai and Ramco, but swung into gear in the early part of May with a 20-point win over Murrayville, and a 92-point drubbing of Paringa.

Brown's Well eased passed Wunkar in the elimination final at Paringa by 24 points, frustrating the Bulldogs' ball movement, before knocking off minor premier BSR by 44 points in the preliminary final.

The Bombers were ultimately outclassed right from the word go on grand final day, thrashed by 82 points at the hands of Murrayville.

While optimistic about the

upcoming season, Francis said his side will have challenges ahead of them in 2025.

"It's going to be a challenging year to be honest, because we've had a lot of people leave the club for various reasons," he said.

"Some have young families, some have moved for work, and others are travelling so our numbers at training have been improving, but have been down on previous seasons.

"I think the fact that Brown's Well have lost the last two grand finals has definitely had an impact on motivation levels early on, but as we get closer to starting, I can see us starting to get back into it."

Running defender Zack Joannou was named Brown's Well's best on grand final day, but he has since departed the club.

Brown's Well's ability to defend the ground was one of its best strengths throughout the previous

season, holding much of its opposition to low totals.

"I believe Brown's Well supporters can expect a fast, open, and free-flowing game. We are looking to score, play with freedom and also bring a lot of fun energy into the match," Francis said.

"We really want to turn the ball over in dangerous spots and rebound with a lot of pace.

"Overall, I'm very excited to get back to playing footy, and although we have lost a few players, we'll still have a very competitive team.

"As always, it's not just about footy out here, so we need to make sure we're building culture to help set the club up for sustained success."

Harrison Chandler and Max Fitzgerald were both impressive in attack for the Bombers throughout last year, and will need to be at their best again.

Chandler finished as the league's leading goalkicker with 64, while Fitzgerald booted through 22 as the Bombers found paths to goal with ease throughout the campaign, leading to success.

Francis will be hoping to take the group back to the decider once again, but the question will be is if Brown's Well can overcome the prospect of grand final day?



Bombers veteran Bennett Pickering sinks his fist into a spoil as the Bombers suffered an early season defeat to the Roosters.

**BROWN'S WELL FOOTBALL CLUB**



Brown's Well players run out for a clash with Ramco in round three of last season. The Bombers will be coached by Nathan Francis in 2025. PHOTOS: Facebook



Sedan-Cambrai will be looking to return to finals football in season 2025 under new leadership.

PHOTO: Grant Schwartzkopff



## Magpies to bring the fight in 2025

### LACHLAN DAND

**Armed with a new coach, the Sedan-Cambrai Magpies will be hoping to put season 2024 in the rear-view mirror, and get back to the glory days of the 2023 premiership.**

Sedan-Cambrai were a force to be reckoned with in 2023, finishing the season undefeated on the way to a 38-point grand final win, but 2024 failed to go to plan.

Chris Eaton's side landed in sixth spot, two wins out of the finals series, and the Magpies elected to appoint Shane Cooke as its newest coach.



Shane Cooke will take charge of the Magpies this season, following his appointment in November.

PHOTO: Facebook

Cooke brings a wealth of experience with him at both playing and assistant level, at clubs such as Pulteney, Lockleys, and Mannum, and said the group is in good spirits ahead of the upcoming campaign.

"So far everything is going really well, and we've been able to get numbers on the track which is a really good sign," he said.

"There is a lot of enthusiasm this year for the footy club, which is really exciting coming off of a disappointing season last year.

"The actual level of commitment has been really impressive this year, but we've trained every session that I've set up, and had people there.

"So, to me, the commitment from everyone to having a good year is there, and the competitiveness is a lot higher than I thought it was going to be coming into the footy club."

In what is a bonus for the club, the Magpies have a favourable fixture, with four out of their last five games to be played on home turf.

Attacking football is the philosophy for Sedan-Cambrai this season, and Cooke ensures that Magpies supporters will see high-scoring matches.

Although at times Sedan-Cambrai may



take time to adjust to the plan, Cooke's enthusiasm will see his side become one of the most watchable teams in the MVFNL.

"When we have the ball, it's going to be about taking the game on, but you will see us play a zone defence," he said.

"Hopefully we can pull it off, because it is a bit harder to pull off than man-on-man, but with our numbers we've got on the track, we can train it.

"It might take a couple of games to set in, and as a coach I might have to wear a little bit of that if we don't get it right.

"But we will be setting up structurally on the defensive side, because if we can't get the footy back, we'll struggle.

"If the players are making the right decisions but it doesn't come off, that's fine because that skill will come as the season progresses."





## Ramco keen to make finals

**CHRISTINE WEBSTER**

**The Ramco Roosters will have their eye on making the Murray Valley Football League's grand final this year.**

They have recruited two Murrayville players, Jake Durdin and Jesse Bannister, who were part of the team that won the 2024 premiership.

A grade coach Barry Gavranich said two of

Ramco's former premiership players will also be returning home this year.

"We have added some quality to the team and most of the players are coming back from last year," he said.

Gavranich returned to coach Ramco last year and 2025 will be his 13th year in a row as a senior coach.

He was a coach for Mawson Lakes for six years, and previously coached the Roosters from 2015 to 2017.

"I now know what to expect from some of the players and they now know what to expect from me," Gavranich said.

He said hopefully this year things "will click a little bit better" in the team.

The Roosters ended up finishing fifth on the Murray Valley Football League's ladder last season, and Gavranich said it was disappointing to miss the finals.

Gavranich said often the difference in the game towards the end of the season was as low as 15 points.

"After a good start to the season, we fell away," he said.

"Injuries and players not being available did not help the situation.

"It was such a close competition during last



**RAMCO ROOSTERS**

year's season that on the day anyone could have beaten anyone.

"That is what happened if you did not have your full team of players."

Gavranich said hopefully the refreshed team line up would boost the chances of a place in the finals this year.

"We are always optimistic at the start of a new season, with new players and a clean slate all ready to go," he said.



Ramco playing Paringa in the A grade Murray Valley Football League's competition last year. PHOTOS: Grant Schwartzkopff



**We have added some quality to the team and most of the players are coming back from last year.**



# Can the Redbacks get back to the top?

**LACHLAN DAND**

**It was all going right for the Blanchetown–Swan Reach Redbacks (BSR) in season 2024, right up until the Murray Valley Football Netball League (MVFNL) finals series got underway.**

It was in that finals series where the Redbacks were bounced out in straight sets – first, a 30-point loss to eventual premiers Murrayville, followed by a 44-point loss at home in the preliminary final against Brown's Well.

So, the question that has lingered for second-year coach James Mapstone is just how the Redbacks get over the heartache of last year.

"I said to the boys that I don't want to harp on about it too much, but we definitely have to learn from it," he said.

"I think everyone could agree that we just thought we were going to go out there and win it, but to go straight sets leaves a pretty bitter taste in your mouth.

"A lot of the boys know that the ones towards the end of their career really want to go out with a premiership, so they're hungrier than ever, it's just getting everyone else back on board.

"We work pretty hard, and we trained very hard last year, but we just have to give them that mindset that we can go again."

BSR is presented with the opportunity of hosting the 2025 grand final at Blanchetown, and Mapstone said that fact had been discussed throughout the pre-season.

"It's definitely something that we've spoken about, because there would be



BSR will be among the favourites for the premiership this season, with the opportunity to play the grand final on home turf. PHOTO: Facebook

nothing better than winning it on your home deck in front of your supporters," he said.

"We're just encouraging everyone to get around the lads this year and try and get them over the line.

"Obviously it's a lot easier to get to for travel, and we'd be a lot more comfortable, but we've got to get there first, which is the main thing.

"I think going from last year – anything but a grand final appearance would be a failed season for us, so let's hope we can get there this year."

The Redbacks were the form team for much of the competition during 2024, dropping just one game in the home-and-away season.

Thomas Tacono proved a welcome addition, with 33 goals helping him finish third in the leading goalkicker race.

Mapstone showed class through the middle of the ground, while youngsters Max Speyer and Cameron Horstmann were among those who impressed often.

The Redbacks coach is well aware of his team's unique arrangements, using two home venues, but also having some of the longest road trips

in the competition.

"We'll just be managing expectations week-by-week this year, and the travel is something a lot of teams struggle with, so the message to the boys is how important it is to win all of our home games," he said.

"That's when we'll have our strongest squad, and week-to-week the team will fluctuate a bit, but we're just looking at the top four.

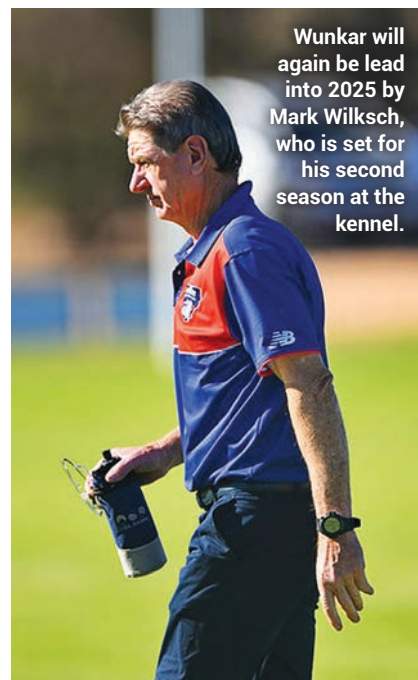
"That's what we're aiming for, and then we can reassess for the finals in terms of who is available from there.

"We'll go out with a similar game plan to last year, and hope the execution is a little bit better this time around."





Wunkar players celebrate a goal in the round two thriller against Paringa.  
PHOTOS: Grant Schwartzkopff



Wunkar will again be lead into 2025 by Mark Wilksch, who is set for his second season at the kennel.

## Can the Bulldogs find their bite?

**LACHLAN DAND**

**It was a season of building for Wunkar in 2024, but as year two under Mark Wilksch approaches, optimism is high at the Bulldogs.**

Wunkar had a rollercoaster of a season last year, finishing on six wins, and squeezing into the finals series, before being defeated by 24 points against eventual grand finalist Brown's Well in the elimination final.

The Bulldogs did claim some major scalps throughout the season, highlighted by an 18-point win over premier Murrayville in round 10, as well as a 124-point domination against Paringa, when it was blessed with the additions of ex-AFL stars Tom Jonas and Ben Kennedy.

However, the slate is wiped clean, and with a favourable fixture, Wunkar will be setting its sights on going deeper into September action.

Wilksch said things are shaping up well ahead of the upcoming campaign, with the group in high spirits.

"We've kept a bit of a lid on the excitement from previous years with a new coach and player signings that we've had in the past," he said.

"We've been training twice a week since mid-January, which we haven't always done, and guys are starting to get the reward out of that extra work.

"A lot of the guys are making a lot of noticeable improvements from the extra session, largely around the skills.

"It's easy to question your fitness when you're not playing well and losing, but it's rarely questioned when you're playing well and winning.

"An extra hour a week of ball handling is really paying dividends, and it all adds up when you throw a little bit here and there."

Although Wunkar's medical room is full, with three players on the long-term injury list, Wilksch is looking to work with what the Bulldogs have at their disposal.

Expecting a close competition in season 2025, Wilksch is fully aware of the difficult competition he faces.

Admitting that the Bulldogs rode their luck at times last season, the Wunkar boss said his group will understand the importance of hard work this year.

"We fully understand that we're going to have to win more games to make finals, and you just don't know what the other clubs are doing," he said.

"The draw can skew that a bit, and

our two extra games last year were against the eventual grand final teams, and you're not to know that at the start of the year.

"While we had a win over Murrayville, admittedly in some of the other wins we were a fair way off where we needed to be.

"We can't concern ourselves with that, we just need to keep getting better ourselves, but we'll be a better football team this year than last.

"The game plan now is starting to come together this year, and everyone is starting to get a better understanding of how we want to play the game.

"We want to get to a place of being a perennial finals team, and it's a slow burn, but it's a solid one to make sure we're there every year and being really consistent."





# Dillon ensures no swansong at Paringa

PAUL MITCHELL

**The former RFL Independent competition had a history of teams rapidly bouncing back from adversity to zoom up the ladder – and Paringa could continue that tradition in 2025.**

The Swans endured a difficult 2024 Murray Valley Football League season, finishing bottom with a 3-10 win/loss record and a miserable percentage of 29.77.

The club has its off-field challenges too, but it also has fresh hope, following the appointment of former coach Nick Dillon as senior coach for 2025.

Dillon has an outstanding track record with the Swans, playing in two senior flags (2005 and 2009), then coaching the club to a memorable 2013 grand final win over BSR during the first year of a successful four-season stint at the helm.

After scaling the heights with the Swans, Dillon said his heartstrings lured him back to the club.

"The club was in survival mode and I couldn't sit back and watch it fold," he said.

"The club has been there for me through my toughest times and also provided me with some of my greatest memories and friendships.

"So it was a no-brainer to step up and do my bit to ensure the Swans survive."

Dillon, who also coached former Independent club Cobdogla, along with junior teams at Paringa and Renmark, has a habit of lifting clubs and teams

languishing in the doldrums. He achieves it via hard work and good old-fashioned recruiting, despite the 'approved player points system' making the days of mass off-season player hauls more difficult.

However, working within these restrictions, Dillon and his recruiting team have already landed a lengthy list of either recruits or returning past players.

"Guys like Dean Hill, Jamie Gudgeon and Shane Menz have returned to the club, which has been fantastic for our younger guys – they are setting the tone," he said.

"Then we've picked up some great players too. Benny Carpenter is a fantastic addition to our back six.

"Kyle Hewitt (Wunkar) is as fit as I've seen him and training the house down, and Sam Di Cicco is a guy who comes from a soccer background and I can see him being a really important player for us.

"But I'm also really excited about the improvement from the existing group of players. Fraser Peters, Lachie Daniel and Brock Morey are looking much fitter and dedicated and that has been contagious throughout the group.

"Then there are guys like Mac Lane and Jacob Edwards who have been on the fringe of the side who are pushing really hard to earn a spot in our best 22."

While boosting player stocks is important, Dillon is acutely aware that small country footy clubs need other ingredients to survive and thrive.

"We've had a lot of players join the club for the first time and a lot of players returning as well," he said.

"The committee is doing a good job with attracting new sponsors and things seem to be turning around, but it's only early days and we have a lot of work to do.

"Probably the biggest challenge we currently face is financial. We'd love to see more supporters and former players come watch our games this year which would help our bottom line in a massive way.

"The other one is our netball team. We'd love to see more players come out and give it a go as it's been a tough slog over the past few seasons."

Despite the ugly win-loss record last season, Paringa showed glimpses of what it could be, including a win over eventual premier Murrayville. Expect a much-improved showing in 2025 and beyond.

"The club has been supportive and allowed me to coach my way and put things in place to help us succeed in the long run," Dillon said.

"We've set our goals for the year and the boys want to win a premiership.

"We may not achieve that this season, but we'll put



things in place to give them the best chance possible to do so.

"We've got goals like improving our percentage, winning more away games (and) beating some bogey teams that will hopefully give us some little wins along the way.

"But we're also realistic that the MVFNL is a tough competition now and we're coming from a long way back."

## KEY INS:

Ryan Axon, Josh Hewitt, Kyle Hewitt, Kailan Voigt, Benny Carpenter, Blair Dillon, Hayden Schultz, Phoenix Maxwell, Jamie Gudgeon, Dean Hill, Ben Clifford, Shane Menz, Sam Di Cicco, Tom De Jager.

## KEY OUTS:

Damon Grima, Adren Herrador, Brodie Roesler, Brandon Klun.



Paringa key forward Brock Morey takes the lead for a strong mark in the Swans' win over Ramco last year. PHOTO: Grant Schwartzkopff



Murrayville took home the 2024 MVFNL premiership, thrashing Brown's Well by 82 points in the decider.  
FILE PHOTO

## Back-to-back Blues?

**PAUL MITCHELL**

**Murrayville seems well-placed to again challenge for the premiership, after winning the 2024 Murray Valley Football League grand final in emphatic style.**

The Blues thrashed Brown's Well in the season-decider, but will mount their premiership defence with a new coach, after the club replaced Mick Durdin with Keenan Wilksch.

Wilksch, 30, will be a playing coach, taking on his first senior role, after being a valuable on-field member of the 2024 flag side.

He spoke to Paul Mitchell about the season ahead:

**How's the pre-season been, in terms of being your first one as a senior coach?**

"Pre-season has been good; the boys have embraced a fresh face and a different voice around the club. With it being my first one as a senior coach, I wanted to show the team from the very

beginning the plans and game styles we are looking to implement this season. The players have been quick to jump on board with these changes as there is a clear vision of what we are working towards."

**What about numbers during pre-season?**

"We have had good numbers to trainings with about 20 players attending our first Sunday pre-season training. From there we have been quick to implement weekly trainings with regularly 15-plus players on the track. It is always a challenge... with the cross-over with summer sports like cricket, tennis and basketball). But once those finish, we will look to having strong numbers each week."

**Are you sensing a keenness to follow-up on last season, or is it too early to say that?**

"There is plenty of motivation from the team to go well again this year, without thinking about the successes of last year. The boys have embraced the expectations/challenges I have set for the pre-season

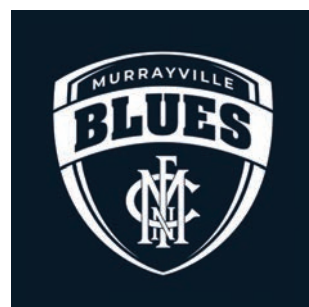
which shows we are looking to move forward in 2025."

**What about a couple of guys who have looked good during pre-season?**

"Ryan Lewis has looked exceptionally fit this pre-season; he has been doing plenty of work organising trainings with the other Adelaide boys. We will be seeing another strong season from him. We're also looking forward to the continued development of our young players, including Cooper Wisneske, Liam Wisneske, Malcolm Moore, Samuel Magnisalis and Josh Batista."

**How's the vibe around the club this year so far?**

"There is a good vibe around the club this year, with the team looking to build on the base we set last year. We cannot wait to help bring the community together this football season and I thank all our volunteers and supporters for their continued support of the Murrayville Football Club as well as the Murrayville Sports Hub."



### KEY INS:

Brock Milde (midfielder, ex-Murrayville junior, played for Corowa Rutherglen in the Ovens and Murray Football League last year).

Hugh Parker (running defender, ex-Murrayville junior).

Cainton Standley-Grace (key forward/ruck, Immanuel College).

Adam Funke (forward, returning local).

Justin Llewellyn (defender, returning local).

Dillon Walker (defender, Murrayville junior/Loxton North under 18s).

Noah Ewins (defender, Murrayville junior/Loxton North under 18s).

### KEY OUTS:

Jake Durdin (Ramco), Jesse Bannister (Ramco), Dean Hill (Paringa).





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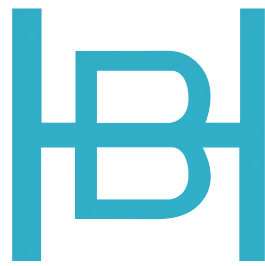
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