



Trevor Gleeson in the Perth Wildcats boardroom with the three NBL championship trophies he has overseen as coach. Picture: Steve Ferrier

BRUSH WITH DEATH

Gleeson's rollercoaster ride to the top of the NBL

■ Craig O'Donoghue



Lying in hospital with two fractured vertebrae, six broken ribs and a punctured lung, Trevor Gleeson should have been dead.

A hydraulic door crushed the then 18-year-old as he attempted to move a cow at the Wannambool abattoir.

He spent two months in hospital, with no feeling below his waist, but the movement in a big toe provided a glimmer of hope that he had avoided permanent damage.

Fortune smiled on Gleeson as he completed a remarkable recovery, but the accident ended his promising sporting career.

"One second before, the hydraulic door would have passed me by and I would have been unscathed and been a very lucky man," Gleeson recalled. "One second later, it could have hit me in the head and I would have been six feet under. "I was very lucky that I was not in a wheelchair."

The young Gleeson loved sport. As an eager 10-year-old, he peered over the Melbourne Tigers' bench and marvelled at iconic coach Lindsay Gaze using 20 cent coins to outline set plays.

Gleeson made his senior basketball debut at just 12 and refused to be intimidated by the violent threats and stench of alcohol from an opponent.

Gleeson stole the ball from the next contest and copped an ugly backhander, but bounced in his feet as a melee erupted.

"It was pretty cool. I could handle the hit. That's the way it was — it was tough and hard," Gleeson said.

His under-14 team finished third at the national titles and he excelled at Australian Rules, making his senior debut for Old Collegians at 16.

The youngest of five children, Gleeson's family lived in government housing and his father John drove trucks. The family later opened a fish-and-chip shop, ensuring his parents worked long hours.

Gleeson followed his parents' example after the accident and dug in. He immersed himself in coaching and worked relentlessly to become elite.

He started with juniors and then, at just 22, coached the Wannambool Mermaids to a title in his first season.

Comedian Dave Hughes played football with Gleeson and attended the same school.

Hughes said the man known affectionately as Buds had an appetite for success.

"He was respected as a hard athlete and a good athlete," he said.

"Wannambool is very proud of Trevor Gleeson. When you grow up in a small town and one of the guys you hang around and play footy and basketball with ends up controlling a major

sporting franchise in the country and (is) doing it very successfully — it's hard to believe."

After two years with the Mermaids, Gleeson took over as Wannambool's men's coach and then led Victoria's under-18 team in America, soaking up basketball at US colleges.

A determination to study exercise science took him to Queensland, where he made such an impression on Brisbane Bullets mentor Brian Kerle during a State league coaching interview that Kerle created a job in his team for Gleeson.

"He had a very good basketball IQ. He was exceptionally good in that area," Kerle said.

Gleeson found himself at the crossroads three years later when the Bullets sacked the entire coaching team. He was 32, unemployed and living interstate. It was decision time.

He scrounged together funds and flew to Los Angeles with nothing but desire. Gleeson met a group of coaches at the NBA Summer League and scored an invitation to work with them at a Las Vegas clinic.

Struggling financially, he jumped on a bus and shared a room with another coaching hopeful — former NBA centre Bob Thornton. They built a rapport and Thornton drove him to another camp in Santa Barbara. Two weeks later, Quad City Thunder hired Thornton as head coach in America's Continental Basketball Association

and signed Gleeson as his assistant.

"It was a sliding-doors moment," Gleeson recalled.

"If I wasn't there at that training run, I wouldn't have been invited to camp (and) I wouldn't have got the opportunity."

Hard work continued to open doors. Gleeson shifted to Sioux Falls Skyforce midway through 2003 and ended up in charge.

Jobs in Korea followed, but Gleeson yearned for home soil and returned with a resume that demanded NBL attention. He led the Townsville Crocodiles to five finals series and was named NBL coach of the year in 2011 before returning to Victoria to coach the Tigers.

Political instability cost him that job, but Gleeson took his talents to the AFL as a skills coach with North Melbourne in 2012 and then Hawthorn when they won the 2013 premiership.

"The ball is in the hand of a basketballer a hell of a lot more than it's in the hand of a footballer and it's in a confined space," four-time Hawks premiership coach Alastair Clarkson said.

"He took us through a whole heap of exercises that he'd been doing for years and that proved really productive. Sam Mitchell probably enjoyed it the most. Then the likes of Brad Hill and Isaac Smith really got benefits too."

Gleeson remained hungry to be an NBL coach and Clarkson's philosophies fascinated him.

Armed with new ideas and a desire for sustained success, Gleeson took the Perth Wildcats by storm, winning three NBL titles in four seasons.

He's now chasing a historic three-peat, with the Cats facing the Adelaide 36ers in the first game of their three-match play-off series in Adelaide next Saturday night. You'll find Gleeson in his office by 6.30am every day, living the mantra that success is hard earned.

"It's something I love doing," he said. "You wake up every day and you're excited to get to work and get going. That hasn't changed from 20 years ago when I was doing it as a volunteer coach. When I first started, there weren't full-time jobs in my profession. I'm very lucky."



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