



A twist of fate

Born into a sports-mad family in country Victoria, Perth Wildcats Coach Trevor Gleeson FAIM has always had the mindset of a competitor, though he is not convinced his professional career in the industry he loves was ever a forgone conclusion.

by Sandra Argese, photography *The West Australian*

"I am the youngest of five siblings – all sport crazy," he told attendees at AIM WA's Inspirational Leader Series. "I wasn't too bad, but I don't think I would have gone on to play professional sport."

It is perhaps partly for this reason Mr Gleeson is grateful for a workplace accident he suffered at the age of 18.

Attempting to lure a cow through a hydraulic door at an abattoir, he was crushed when its cable snapped, landing him in hospital for six weeks with six broken ribs, a punctured lung and crushed vertebrae.

"I remember hitting the floor twice," he said. "It was the most intense pain I have ever felt. Then I passed out. They told me the door weighed a tonne-and-a-half and eight guys had to get a piece of wood to pry it off me."

Mr Gleeson said the incident represented a turning point.

"That was a really big catalyst and it changed my career and life completely," he said.

"When I was going through that period I didn't think it was something for the better, but looking back, it actually bettered my life.

"My life revolved around sport; it was a big hit socially – my mates were all playing and I was on the sidelines. This was my catalyst to get into coaching."

It was a career which would take Mr Gleeson around Australia and the world gaining experience at the helm of a range of regional and big city teams, beginning in 1990 at the age of 20 when he got his first gig as the coach of Victoria's Warrnambool Mermaids, before taking the head coach role for the city's Seahawks side in 1992.

At the age of 23, a realisation his injury had cost him the carefree experiences enjoyed by many of his mates spurred Mr Gleeson to travel overseas.

He intended to spend six months backpacking, but would ultimately travel between Europe, South America and Africa over the course of three years.

Getting serious

Eventually returning to Australia with an aim to get back into coaching, Mr Gleeson spent a year studying in Brisbane while living on the Gold Coast.

"That was pretty challenging," he said. "I was backpacking and partying most of the time, so to have the will to study and finish reports and assignments on time was a struggle, but it taught me some discipline, which has very much held my career in place."

Having spent four years away from coaching by this time, Mr Gleeson wasn't overly optimistic about his chances when the coaching role came up for the National Basketball League's (NBL) Brisbane Bullets.

"I had been out of basketball for four years and came from Victoria, so no-one really knew me," he said. "I still remember debating over whether to put a resume in for the job. The internet was relatively new and it was still the norm to send applications by mail.

"I was sitting on the fence. It was Thursday and applications closed at 5pm on the Friday, so the mail wasn't going to get there on time. In the end I jumped in the car on Friday, handed it in, and drove back to the Gold Coast."

The most successful coach in the Perth Wildcats' history, Trevor Gleeson FAIM has four premierships to his name.

Called for an interview at the club, Mr Gleeson missed out on a part-time coaching role but was asked to join in a full-time development coaching role, staying with the team for three seasons before a confluence of a change in team ownership and the side failing to make playoffs resulted in him losing his job.

"There wasn't a lot of scope to stay on in my chosen career, so I didn't really know what to do after that," he said.

"I tried to get a job in Australia and I couldn't. Basketball coaching in Australia in the late 1990s certainly didn't attract a professional, full-time wage."

This spurred Mr Gleeson to try his luck in the United States. Jumping on a plane without knowing anybody, he landed in Los Angeles, caught a bus to a hostel and proceeded to work at as many basketball camps as possible.

"My philosophy was to get there early, be the first one on the court and if anyone wanted to shoot, I would work them out," he said.

"If anyone wanted to do extra shots, I'd go and shoot with them. That was my philosophy – to do the work and evolve that way instead of telling them how good I was, my experience or who I knew, because I didn't have that experience."

Mr Gleeson became the assistant coach of the Quad City Thunder, which later led to a role as head coach in 2003 with the Sioux Falls Skyforce, where he would meet future wife Dawn.

After six years away, during which Mr Gleeson also coached in South Korea, he and Dawn returned to Australia in 2006 where he would coach the now defunct Townsville Crocodiles – winning NBL Coach of the Year for the 2010-11 season – before moving to Victoria to be closer to family while Dawn battled breast cancer. It was here Mr Gleeson picked up the coaching gig at his childhood team the Melbourne Tigers – now Melbourne United – before being let go, again after a change in team ownership.



Trevor Gleeson FAIM and family.



Trevor Gleeson FAIM

Roles Head Coach at Perth Wildcats; Ambassador at Mothers Day Classic; Director and Owner at Aus Elite.

Worked Assistant Coach at Australian Boomers; Skills Coach at Hawthorn Football Club; Skills Coach at North Melbourne Football Club; Head Coach at Melbourne Tigers; Head Coach at Townsville Crocodiles NBL Team; Assistant Coach at Jeonju KCC Egis; Assistant Coach at Seoul Samsung Thunders; Assistant Coach at Sioux Falls Skyforce; Assistant Coach at Quad City Thunder; Assistant Coach at Brisbane Bullets; Head Coach at Warrnambool Seahawks; Player Scout at Portland Trailblazer.

Member since 2019.



Wildcats era

Taking a leave of absence from basketball, Mr Gleeson's skills were soon sought by North Melbourne and Hawthorn in the Australian Football League (AFL), with the clubs looking to boost their ball handling proficiency, though the benefit of experience flowed both ways.

"When you look at who was at Hawthorn at that stage – Alistair Clarkson, Adam Simpson, Chris Fagan, Luke Beveridge, Brendan Bolton and Brett Ratten – there were a lot of people to learn from," he said.

"I was a lot angrier as a coach back in those days, you might see me now and think I'm angry, but I'm not. To see how the AFL coaches related to the players, how the players took ownership, it was a great experience because there was no pressure on me at all. It was great for my coaching."

Signing on as the head coach of the Perth Wildcats in 2013, Mr Gleeson wasted no time utilising his newly gained experience.

"When I got to Perth I gave a lot more ownership and responsibility to my players and encouraged them to pick up leadership and culture roles, which helped me a lot," he said.

The team would go on to win the minor premiership for the 2013-14 season with a 21-7 record, before beating the Adelaide 36ers in three games in the NBL Grand Final Series.

Following this success, Basketball Australia appointed Mr Gleeson as assistant coach of the Australian Boomers ahead of the 2014 FIBA Basketball World Cup in Spain, and he carried on in this role through to the 2016 Rio Olympics.

Today the most successful coach in the Perth Wildcats' history, with four premierships (2014, 2016, 2017 and 2019) to his name, Trevor Gleeson has never not made the finals while at the helm of Western Australia's most beloved basketball team.

In fact, the Wildcats have created one of the most remarkable streaks in Australian sporting history by playing in 33 consecutive playoff campaigns.

Mr Gleeson is the only Wildcats coach to win multiple championships at the club, and in December 2019 became the eighth coach in NBL history to reach 400 games. 