

# HOW TO PLAY | HANGING WITH THE BEST

Who better to advise on how to take a 'speccie' than 'The Birdman' himself, Brett Burton. **By Nick Bowen.**

**B**rett Burton has always loved flying for 'speccies' but as a junior his coaches encouraged him to stay down and crumb.

Ironically, Burton has since become so well known for his high-flying marks after debuting for the Crows in 1999 that he is now almost universally known as 'The Birdman'.

Burton says it was not until a growth spurt in his late teens that he literally started to take off.

"When I was growing up I was quite small, I was 172cm until I was about 19," Burton said.

"So all of my coaches throughout my juniors would encourage me to stay down and crumb."

Unperturbed, Burton continued to practise his high marking in kick-to-kick sessions at school and by himself at home, where he spent countless hours, kicking the ball high in the air and launching himself at it, always trying to take it at its highest point.

Burton's practice eventually paid off. After a growth spurt

took him close to his current height of 185cm, Burton broke into Glenelg's SANFL team at 19 in 1998. Playing at centre half-forward, he finally had a licence to fly for his marks and The Birdman was hatched.

Drafted by the Crows at the end of that season, Burton brought his one-man air show to the AFL.

Much to the delight of crowds across the country, his three coaches at Adelaide – Malcolm Blight, Gary Ayres and Neil Craig – gave him free rein to continue doing what he does best.

Now in his 10th AFL season, Burton says high marking has become almost second nature to him, so much so he rarely practises it.

"It certainly comes naturally to me now and you're best to stop thinking about it too much and just letting it flow," he said.

"For me, it's really all about the timing. What I tell myself is when you see the ball, hold yourself back, then go late and try to take the ball at its highest point.

"When I go for a mark, I don't necessarily try to take the biggest mark or a screamer.

"I always just watch the ball and try to take it at its highest point. I don't take any notice of anyone around me because you can't affect what they're going to do, you can't tell them to stay put so you can jump on them."

Now 30, Burton is continuing to rack up the frequent flyer points in 2008 as evidenced by his classic hanger over Melbourne's Matthew Warnock in round eight (pictured right).

"For me, the hanger is one of the reasons you play footy," he said.

"It is exhilarating, you get a big buzz out of it. You can hear the crowd noise when you go up and, if you take it, it gets even louder.

"But it's not just from an individual point of view. When you see guys take hangers, it lifts the whole side. That's a good feeling to be able to lift your side." ■



## PART 3 OF A SERIES ON HOW TO PLAY THE GAME – OVERHEAD MARKING

This is one of the most spectacular features of Australian Football. It takes great skill and athleticism to launch yourself in the air, but a player who takes a consistent high mark can inspire teammates and bring other players into the game.

### MAIN TEACHING POINTS

- 1 Line body up with the flight of the ball. Keep eyes on the ball.
- 2 Jump off one foot and swing the other knee up to gain maximum height and protect yourself.
- 3 Eyes are kept on the ball; fingers are outstretched and thumbs almost together.

- 4 The ball is met slightly in front of the head with arms extended. It is firmly gripped in the fingers.

### THE GRIP

Ensure the fingers are outstretched and the thumbs almost together.

### GENERAL COACHING HINTS

The ball should be pulled down quickly on to the chest when marking in front of an opponent. When the ball is wet, the hands are brought close together; the fingers tap the ball down where it is gathered on the chest.

**1** Burton runs in to bring his body in direct line with the flight of the ball. His eyes are focused firmly on the ball and he has jumped powerfully off his take-off (left) leg to launch himself towards the ball.

**2** On making contact with his opponent with his legs, Burton is extending them to push his body upwards to gain extra height. He is moving into perfect position to take the ball as high as he can.

**3** With his eyes still firmly focused on the ball and head still, he has brought his hands together in the classical "W" position with thumbs almost touching and fingers outstretched. His arms are extended towards the ball.

**4** He has taken the ball slightly in front of his face with arms extended and has flexed slightly at the elbows to absorb the force of the ball, as it is firmly gripped with the fingers. He has started to pull the ball down to his chest.

• Technical advice in this series courtesy of the AFL Development Department.