

RUCKING

SEARCHING FOR THE PERFECT STRUCTURE



DOMINANT FORCE: At an imposing 211cm, Fremantle's Aaron Sandilands (left) is recognised as the best big man in the game, as much for his football smarts as his physique. Melbourne's Mark Jamar and West Coast's Dean Cox (below) are others who combine skill, smarts and agility in the ruck.

VERSATILE: Collingwood's Darren Jolly, pictured left, outpointing Sydney Swan Shane Mumford, is mobile around the ground and adept at pushing forward to kick a goal.

Every team is searching for a ruck combination that works best for them. Regardless of their approach, they know rucking remains a crucial part of the game, with coaches constantly looking for an edge and the big men refining what they do.

PETER RYAN & CALLUM TWOMEY

Few truly understand the role of ruckwork. Fewer still can assess its value. Ruckmen even have specialist coaches, outliers in a team game.

The best in the business, Fremantle's Aaron Sandilands, says few appreciate how long it takes to learn the art: "I just understand the game a lot more in the last few years, learning where to run and where to position myself."

Sydney Swan Mike Pyke is beginning to work out what it's about: "My main priority is to improve each week and take little steps."

When it comes to selection, ruckmen are football's wicketkeepers, fighting for a specialist position like few others. History shows two ruckmen are needed to win premierships, but the best structure for the modern game is debated more and more as the game quickens, midfield run becomes vital and the search for an edge is constant.

Do we use one specialist and one part-timer? Do we pick one very good and one 'OK' ruckman? Is there room for two top-quality big men? Do we rotate them off the bench or push them forward for a breather? Do we want an athletic runner or a big-bodied stoppage expert?

You need at least one, as Hawthorn found out in round five when its only available big man Brent Renouf was a last-minute withdrawal. His absence prompted coach Alastair Clarkson to deliver post-

match one of the season's biggest understatements: "I reckon losing your ruckman is pretty significant when you've only got one of them."

It's tough having three, as North Melbourne coach Brad Scott is finding out in trying to place Hamish McIntosh, Todd Goldstein and David Hale in the one line-up, unless they bring a variety of attributes to the table.

"I think finding the right combination is about versatility. It's still very difficult for one ruckman to go alone, and we think it's a real strength to have our three key position ruckman-sized players running around the ground who can play other positions," Scott says.

"With our three guys, we know they're all very good ruckmen, but we're trying to develop their games so they can play elsewhere because I don't think you can just run with two ruckmen and play them 50-50 game-time anymore.

"It's always a balance and you're always searching for that balance you want.

"It comes down to a decision - I rate those three players in our best 22, but whether it's necessarily our best structure (having all three in the team) is something we've had to do a lot of experimenting with."

Hawthorn was forced into the laboratory earlier this year. With rucks Simon Taylor, Max Bailey, Wayne Skipper and Luke Lowden injured at the start of the season, ruck coach Damian Monkhorst and fellow assistants resorted to teaching midfielder





Luke Hodge the basics of ruck work. Hodge's role was merely to compete while Renouf rested.

"We focused on teaching him mainly to get the ball down to the ground in the area our ground-level guys knew it was going to be," says Monkhorst, the No. 1 ruckman in Collingwood's 1990 premiership team.

"If the ground-level players are second-guessing where the opposition ruckman is going to put the ball – especially if they happen to be dominant – then it puts everyone behind the eight-ball," he says.

Jarryd Roughead and Carl Peterson were tried too. Employing the third man-up tactic increased (a play Hawthorn continues using to effect). Down on big-man power, the Hawks struggled.

As soon as Skipper was over his injury, however, the Hawks enjoyed a turnaround in fortunes. (It has helped, also, that several other Hawks have returned.) Skipper made his debut in the brown and gold in round seven, and the Hawks have lost only once since, by two points to Geelong last week.

Skipper's smarts, Monkhorst says, have compensated for his comparative lack of height (he is 194cm, one centimetre taller than Roughead), and he has complemented Renouf's athletic, jumping style, which Monkhorst is also fine-tuning.

"Skipper has grown up as a ruckman and, though he's a shorter ruckman, he's got a strong technique, like John Barnes of yesteryear. They get away with being shorter because they're smarter, and he's given the side some balance," Monkhorst says.

The Hawks' experience settled one debate. It's now clear two men capable of contesting stoppages is necessary. But what qualities (or combination of characteristics) do they need?

Former Western Bulldogs ruckman Luke Darcy believes the thinking is "starting to change" and that a premiership team in the future will buck the trend and win with only one (specialist) ruckman.



FIERCE: Essendon's Patrick Ryder goes hard at this contest with Port Adelaide's Dean Brogan.

“I'd also say that by far the most dominant ruckman in the competition is Sandilands”

BRAD SCOTT

"I think it's possible, particularly with the way players now rotate around the ground. If you look at Leigh Brown

at Collingwood, his flexibility is keeping Josh Fraser out of the side because, if they get in trouble, he can be used as a key back, forward or in the ruck," Darcy says.

It's not a simple decision though, as Adelaide ruck coach and former Brisbane Lions, Crows and St Kilda ruckman Matthew Clarke points out.

Clarke agrees that finding the best ruck combination is about "versatility", but also argues that using key-position players as 'pinch-hit' ruckmen can be detrimental.

"Sometimes it works really well in that it frees them up and gets them into the play and gets their confidence going for when they go forward, but other times they'll go out with a dozen plans in their head and not be able to execute any of them," Clarke says.

"We've seen that this year with Kurt Tippett, who has benefited from having a single focus."

Scott says although trends favour athletic ruckmen, room

remains for the more physical, old-style ruck role.

"I note with interest the success of Mitch Clark and Paddy Ryder as mobile ruckmen, and it has been very successful," he says.

"But I'd also say that by far the most dominant ruckman in the competition is Sandilands, because he allows Fremantle to dictate how it wants to set up around the ground and at stoppages.

"If you're asking me who the most important ruckman in the competition is, it's not a versatile ruckman. It's a big, dominant tap-out ruckman in Sandilands."

Monkhorst supports the notion that fundamental elements remain vital. He believes bigger-bodied ruckmen, whose main asset is their strength, will continue to have currency in the modern game.

"Some people get caught up with a ruckman getting 30 possessions, but it's not really a ruckman's role to do that," Monkhorst says.

"If you've got good on-ballers, they should be getting the touches and a ruckman should be making their lives easier.

"Generally you'll find that a smaller, athletic guy will come in for a short period of time and be the new 'fad' everyone's talking about, but then they get found out. The big blokes work them out, and get back to taking over. It's always been the way."

WATCH FOR...

COLLISIONS: The tactic, whereby ruckmen jump into each other at a centre bounce and aim to palm the ball when they land back on the ground, is widespread according to Adelaide's ruck coach Matthew Clarke.

THINK ABOUT...

THE IMPACT OF CHANGE: If the AFL caps interchange rotations, clubs may not be able to carry two genuine ruckmen.

Many midfielders talk of the confidence they get from having a big-bodied ruckman alongside them as they hunt for the ball at ground level. Presence is often an underestimated attribute outside football clubs.

Sandilands has presence, as do Mark Jamar, Darren Jolly and Shane Mumford. Darcy says Sandilands has become the complete package.

"Even if someone like Sandilands only had similar hit-out skills and stoppage work as his strengths, he would need more," Darcy says.

"Sandilands' value at the moment lies in his aggression and physical presence. He floats forward, is a good mark and a good leader."

Sandilands says his performance is measured by the impact he has on the game. "Whether that is giving first use to the midfield, or the quality of your clearances, or the work you do around the ground," he says.

"It's not so much possessions or the number of hit-outs; it's more about following up after the stoppage and your positioning."

Sandilands has an enormous height advantage – at 211cm he is the tallest man in the competition – but his footy smarts are as important as his reach.

The rucking role is clear: give the team the best possible chance to win quality clearances or score or stop goals from stoppages. A dominant ruckman allows teams to set up structures on their terms, rather than reacting.

Almost every week we see how important the decisions ruckmen make at stoppages are to the overall result.

In round 14 when Hawthorn beat the Western Bulldogs, the >>

THE BEST IN THE BUSINESS

→ Champion Data's rankings are geared towards measuring and ranking the impact players have on winning games, combining a range of statistics with factors including the state of the game, where the ball is won and the impact actions have on the scoreboard, to get a more accurate gauge of a player's contribution. The top-five ranked players include the game's premier ruckman.

Brendon Goddard	134
Gary Ablett	131
Paul Chapman	126
Chris Judd	125
AARON SANDILANDS	123



HOW THE RUCKMEN RANK

	Ranking	Disposals*	H-O*	H-O to ADV*	Clearances*
Aaron Sandilands	123	17.2	36.7	9.9	4.1
Patrick Ryder	89	12.0	20.9	3.8	2.3
Dean Cox	88	16.4	24.5	5.0	3.1
Shane Mumford	88	13.0	25.2	4.8	3.1
Mark Jamar	85	13.0	29.4	7.8	3.3

* AVERAGE PER GAME

HIT-OUTS

AARON SANDILANDS	550
Mark Jamar	441
Dean Cox	368
Shane Mumford	328
Patrick Ryder	314

HIT-OUTS TO ADVANTAGE

AARON SANDILANDS	149
Mark Jamar	117
Dean Cox	75
Mark Blake	74
Darren Jolly	67

PERCENTAGE OF HIT-OUTS TO ADVANTAGE

AARON SANDILANDS	27.1 %
Mark Jamar	26.5 %
Sam Jacobs	25.3 %
Ivan Maric	24.7 %
Will Minson	24.1 %

CLEARANCES

AARON SANDILANDS	61
Nic Naitanui	58
Ben Hudson	55
Mark Jamar	49
Dean Cox	47

Hawks kicked two critical goals after errors by the Bulldogs in the ruck contests.

You don't have to look far back to see even more celebrated instances. Remember Gary Ablett's last-quarter goal from a stoppage in the 2007 preliminary final against Collingwood? Many would forget three of Nick Davis's four last-quarter goals in the 2005 second semi-final for the Sydney Swans against Geelong came from stoppages.

Deciding the best rucking structure is hard because patience is often required. Time needs to be invested in big men to get them playing well.

What is less clear is how much game time is enough. It makes the (ruck)man management issue huge. Everyone wants more game time. Greater recognition goes to those who shoulder the load. The more you play, the better you become. For every No. 1 ruckman you can bet there is another just waiting for an opportunity. There is no better example of this than the Swans' Pyke.

Just 17 games into his career, Pyke is showing signs of adapting to the game's demands

and his past two performances have been good.

Pyke admits he relishes any chance to take the lead: "Opportunities can define your career in some ways," he says.

The chances he had in rounds eight and nine to ruck solo when Mumford was out suspended were beneficial to his development. "Going in as the No. 1 (ruckman), you face the No. 1 for the other team as well. They are at a higher standard than a back-up," Pyke says.

"When you are on the field longer, you get to settle into the game better and you feel more part of things. You get a feel for the midfield group a bit more than you do if you are just coming in for the odd contest."

But coaches will always put the good of the team first. Pyke knows that, but he also knows this: "Every moment I have on the field is of benefit to me."

Sandilands says it is vital he receives support from a back-up ruckman, even if it's only for a short amount of time.

"I know the best sides I played in were the ones that had a strong ruck combination"

LUKE DARCY

"You've got to have someone who can give you a chop out for five or 10 minutes because, if you are coming up against opposition

sides that have two quality ruckmen, there is no way you are going to keep up with them," he says.

Throw in the third-man up tactic, where teams use smaller players to jump into the ruck contest, and it's not hard to imagine the toll contest after contest takes on the players.

The fact Sandilands' back-up ruckmen Kepler Bradley and Michael Johnson can also play forward gives Fremantle a perceived advantage.

Darcy knows what it's like to be both the back-up and the No. 1. He learned the craft alongside Scott Wynd. When Wynd retired at the end of 2000, Darcy assumed the main position and found that, though he wanted to ruck solo and played better when he did, having a partner benefited the team.

"I think your natural competitive instinct says you want to be out on the ground 100 per cent of the time, but having said that, I know the best sides I played in were the ones that had a strong ruck combination," Darcy says.

Mumford summed up the reality with one sentence to Fox Sports after the North Melbourne game last week. "Me and 'Pykey' have started to forge a good combo and 'Seabs' (Mark Seaby) might struggle to get back in."

The comment had it all: The No. 1, the rucking partnership, the battle for position, the knockabout banter and the selection dilemma.

It's a tough gig, the life of the ruckman. The physical demands are obvious; the mental requirements to compete with everyone in your vicinity less so. And to make matters worse, very few understand the role at all.

So why does Sandilands love it so much? "I just love playing footy in general to be honest. It's hard to put the finger on one thing I enjoy about playing in the ruck." 🐾