

Jets set for Cup take off

Football

BY MICHAEL SINCLAIR

"WE'RE looking for a big team effort." That's the message coming from Western Jets regional manager Shane Sexton with one week until the TAC Cup U18 season gets under way.

"We've stressed the importance of how our players conduct themselves and we're making sure that everyone uses the team as a vehicle in part where they want to go," he said last week.

"We just really want to come together as both a club and team and we're having a major focus on getting everything right. As a group, we just want to keep the team-orientation thing going and we are working on developing our squad."

The club is boasting a slick new playing unit and an experienced coaching panel to help its attack in the TAC Cup competition for the year.

New names to the coaching line-up include Essendon premiership player Damian Peverill and former North Melbourne player Dion Miles (assistant coaches), while champion Essendon veteran Steve Allessio also takes over the reins as a part-time ruck development coach.

And Sexton can't contain his delight in the new appointments.

Elshani strong in comeback fight



A night with punch ... Ilaz Elshani goes head to head with Ashley Dohnt on Sunday night.

Picture: PAUL CAVKA.

Kick Boxing

INTERNATIONAL Kickboxing Federation (IKBF) Commonwealth and Australian champion Ilaz Elshani was a headline act as more than 2000 people packed the Keilor Basketball Stadium when kickboxing came to town on Sunday night.

Deer Park resident Elshani - who returned to the ring after three years in retirement - met an undefeated Goulburn Valley fighter Ashley Dohnt and took out the five-round bout on points.

West Sunshine fighter Evan Themalakis proved too strong for Werribee-bred Tony 'Mr Hollywood' Miletic winning the Australian middleweight title on a technical knock out in the second round.

But it was former western suburbs girl Laura Skinner who stole the show with a stunning knock-out third round against New Zealand import Julie Woods.



Pushing forward ... Luke Hill (no 43) shepherds Cameron Gauci with the ball.

"It's just terrific for the kids to be able to be under the guidance of these sort of fellas, considering the range of experience they've had at national and other levels" he said.

"It's a great experience that they're available to help the kids from the club's point of view."

The Jets - who will play all home games at Point Gellibrand this season - have undergone an intense training schedule in the off-season

and have even used weekend camps in Ballarat to stress the importance of developing a strong "team-oriented" playing unit.

"We're hopeful that we'll see an improved performance from the whole squad this year," Sexton said.

"The kids have worked very hard over the break and the early season form has been very encouraging - we think that there are a number of talented kids within the

group. The Jets will meet the Dandenong Stingrays at home in the first round of competition on Sunday, 7 April.

Local boys in the squad are: Sean Towner (Keilor), Jacob Savage (Albion), David Rogowski (Keilor), Luke Hill (Deer Park), Liam Fitzgerald (Keilor), Jonathon Donovan (North Sunshine), Marc Dawson (St Albans), Ben Collard (St Albans), Luke Buttigieg (Keilor).

Grant granted second chance

Football AFL

BY MICHAEL SINCLAIR

YOU could feel a sense of relief from Chris Grant and the rest of his playing outfit as the Western Bulldogs ran on to the Whitten Oval last Friday afternoon.

And that relief also flowed through more than 2000 supporters who flocked to the ground to watch their favourite son in action in the club's last pre-season hit out before the start of the season proper this weekend.

The past six weeks will be remembered by the 252-game player as the worst in his playing career, following the AFL insurer's refusal to cover Grant for his condition - congenital spinal canal stenosis.

But the champion's neck condition controversy was finally buried the day before with the AFL clearing the captain to play for his club in the new season.

However, the usually straight-faced Grant launched a scathing attack on the AFL, describing the leaking of confidential meetings to the media as "disgraceful" and the past six weeks as "enormously frustrating".

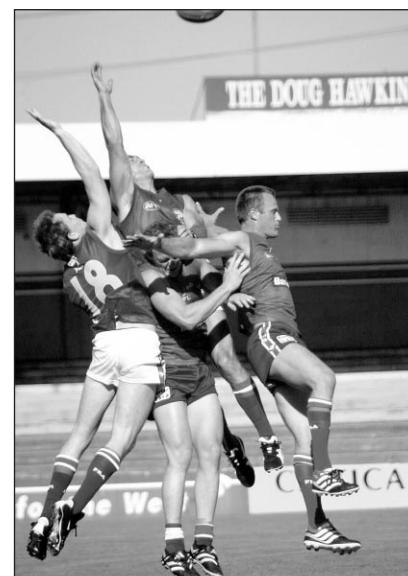
"I want to stress that there is no evidence that I have ever experienced a spinal cord injury," he said. "In fact, the most recent medical opinion of two highly respected orthopaedic surgeons is that I am at no greater risk of spinal cord injury than any other player."

"Any concerns otherwise expressed, were misplaced and unfortunately have been inaccurately reported."

Last Wednesday, two surgeons declared Grant was "medically fit" to play for the Bulldogs.

Despite Grant lacking some obvious pre-season match practice, Bulldog coach Terry Wallace said he was pleased to see his captain take the field just a week before round one and won't hesitate in slipping him into his usual playing position.

"I think we played him pretty much everywhere today," he said last week.



Good to be back ... Chris Grant (right) at training last week.

"He's pulled up well and he's handled that fairly well, so I don't think that we will be restricted in our ability to use him (on the ground).

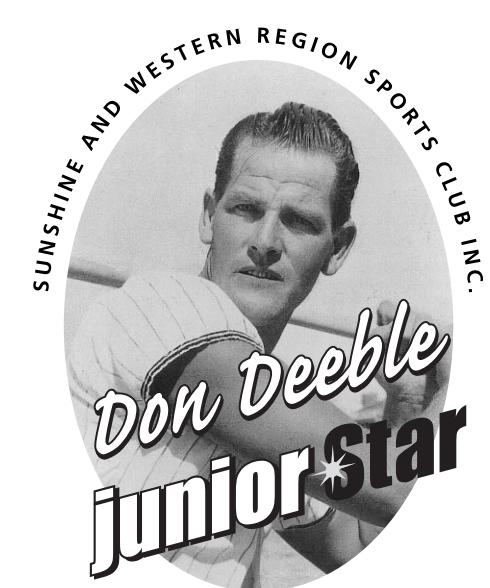
"What we may see - especially on the quick Colonial (Stadium) surface - is that we may have to give him a breather at some stage. Whether that's deep or off the ground at any point in time, I think we might have to work that through, but I don't think that'll restrict the way he can get across the turf during the game," Wallace said.

And Wallace said the past two months had definitely taken their toll.

"I thought that there was a chance a month ago, that I mightn't have had him for the start of the season and then whether I had him at all," he said.

"From a planning point of view and where we're trying to head, it makes my life a hell of a lot easier."

Grant will be a certain starter in the Bulldogs' round one clash with Adelaide at Colonial Stadium on Sunday.



Swinging batsman



Promising prospect ... Andrew Russell swings the bat with style and confidence.

NEWPORT teenager, winner of the Don Deeble Junior Star award for March, Andrew Russell loves giving opposition pitchers headaches.

To say that Russell is one of the country's most promising baseball prospects is an understatement. He has a seemingly endless list of credits to his name.

Russell has been a member of the prestigious Victorian Institute of Sport's Baseball Academy since 2000 and has represented his state and country in the Victorian and Australian U16 squads (2000), U18 team (2001-02) and in the Victorian Schoolboy's championships in 2001.

The talented 17-year-old Williamstown High School student also plays for the Waverley Baseball Club's senior team in the Victorian Baseball Association's division one men's competition.

VIS head baseball coach Matthew Sheldon-Collins praised the efforts of the teenager and emphasised the importance of continuing education.

"While in our baseball program, we also require all our athletes to maintain high academic standards," he said. "Andrew has shown the necessary time management skills to deal with the rigours of our training schedule and the required commitment to his studies."

THE Don Deeble Junior Star award is featured monthly in Star - thanks to the support of Werribee Mitsubishi, Puma Australia and SWRSC - and is an incentive-based award named after one of Australia's greatest baseballers.

A Junior Star is nominated by Star and SWRSC and is presented to a young sportsperson performing at national or state level or who has the potential to get there. Monthly prizes include cash sponsorships and product support from Puma Australia with a major award and \$2000 cash prize awarded judged for the best nominee in June.

For more information or to nominate someone for the award, send your sporting resume to: The Don Deeble Junior Star Award, c/o Star Newspapers, Level 1/34 Amis Crescent, East Keilor 3033. Alternatively nominations can be sent by fax on 9331 0381 or email to: michael.sinclair@senews.com.au.

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