

# Affirm<sub>press</sub>

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# **PLAYING ON**

## **THE STORY OF NEIL SACHSE**

**Neil Sachse and Michael Sexton**



I have too many people to thank, but there is one person in my life I have to mention, as I would not be here today if it wasn't for her. My wife, Janyne, who was twenty-three at the time of my injury, with two boys aged just one and two. She would visit me at the hospital every chance she had, often travelling fifty minutes each way. When it was time for me to move out of hospital, she never flinched at taking on the extra burden I was bringing home. She was the love of my life the minute I met her and she still is. Janyne, thank you. I will do everything I can to keep you safe.

– Neil

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**W**E MIGHT AS well get the pronunciation right from the start. It is Sax-ee. Not Sash or Sax but Sax-ee.

People may mispronounce the name but they don't forget it.

On a steaming February day in 2009, I was in a taxi ensnarled in traffic in Melbourne's central business district. To kill time the driver asked why I was in town. I explained I was going to the Whitten Oval in Footscray to see Neil Sachse.

He paused for a moment as his mind tumbled the name over and over, searching for its context. Then he said softly, 'That was a tragedy what happened to that man.'

At that time it had been almost thirty-five years since the tragedy occurred. It was the VFL's round two of 1975. Footscray was at home playing Fitzroy.

In the last quarter Neil went for the ball and in doing so stumbled, collided with an oncoming player and broke his neck. It remains the most catastrophic injury in the history of the VFL/AFL competition and guaranteed that one of the sport's darkest moments would be associated with the name *Sachse*.

Like the surnames of many South Australians, *Sachse* has its origin in 19th-century religious dissidents from what is now Germany. South Australia was a free colony set up along radical political principals. The first groups from Silesia and Prussia arrived alongside their British counterparts, seeking a more tolerant society than the one they knew. Among them were four brothers named Sachse, whose descendants played Australian Rules football with vigour and skill.

There is a stereotype of big-boned, strong men from that part of Europe, and Neil Sachse and his brothers fit it. Dennis is the oldest by three years and John the youngest by four. They both have enormous frames, strong hips and forearms like legs of lamb.

Dennis was a bear at full-forward for North Adelaide in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Fullbacks of the time clenched their fists in frustration trying to spoil him. After deceptively quick leads, Dennis would wind up slowly and thunder accurate punts at goal.

As a nineteen-year-old in 1967, he kicked ninety goals to lead the South Australian National Football League (SANFL) in his first season. Neil and John followed Dennis to the Roosters, and in 1974 all three played in the same senior side.

Dennis says they were a team within a team. It was a natural extension of their backyard games as boys.

‘Sometimes when Mum and Dad went out and left us at home we played footy *inside* the house,’ Neil remembers, ‘and the walls used to shake.’

In those house-rattling sibling clashes, Neil was the skinny middle brother. Skinny in this case is a relative term, because as a

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player Neil was strong enough to play key positions in attack, defence or on the ball.

Whatever position he was asked to play, he went about it in a ruthless fashion, taking and giving whatever came. Along with the toughness was talent. Neil had an ability to read the game and respond to the moment. He had strong hands and skills on both sides of his body.

When asked to explain how he did it he struggles, offering not much more than he enjoyed the game and was good at it.

His progression through the grades was a logical trajectory. He was spotted playing for his local club, Gepps Cross, by North Adelaide scouts. Once at Prospect he played in the club's junior grades, reserves and then league side. At twenty Neil was picked for South Australia and was so keenly sought by Footscray that its captain, Laurie Sandilands, offered to help pay for him to come across the border.

Dennis and Neil were part of teams that won back-to-back premierships with North Adelaide, and at the end of the 1972 season defeated Carlton by one point to claim the title 'Champions of Australia'. That game was played in difficult conditions that suited graft and commitment over flair. When Neil is asked about it, a happy smile spreads across his face, and he offers a tease of memory. 'I think I stood "the Doormat" [Bruce Doull] at some stage. I played with a broken hand. It was such a great feeling.'

At a reunion at Prospect Oval several years ago, the old Roosters players were ushered upstairs to the boardroom. There was no wheelchair access, and so Neil and Dennis had to find another

way. It took several attempts at different routes, but eventually they struggled through some narrow passageways, Dennis helping to manoeuvre his brother's wheelchair.

Neil is a tetraplegic, more commonly known in Australia as a quadriplegic: his spinal injury has left him with four damaged limbs.

When you meet him he rolls his shoulder forward and offers up a crooked hand to shake. His fingers are stiff and lifeless, but there is strength in the arm. His enormous frame fills the chair and fidgets and wriggles in what seems an endless search for comfort.

The first time I met him was at his Adelaide city office. As a reporter looking for stories I rang him out of the blue asking about issues relating to disability and spinal injury. He suggested a few topics and invited me to visit. His office is part of a building shared by various professional organisations, and it has a gleaming common lunch room. Neil looped his thumb through the handle of a coffee mug and expertly moved it from the high counter to the table without spilling anything. I found myself not knowing whether to help. Would this be useful or patronising?

His smile is a horizontal crease across a face that carries the results of playing mishaps in a series of fine scars and a pugilist's nose.

I realised I was talking too much. Across the table Neil sipped at his drink and listened, waiting patiently for a moment to speak.

Although he takes deep breaths when needing to add volume, his voice is soft. He isn't verbose and doesn't enjoy talking about himself. As a child he became so overwhelmed with the attention of a birthday party that when those gathered began singing 'Happy Birthday' to him, he sought relief by hiding under the table and

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refusing to come out. Early in his football career North Adelaide played Richmond in a practice match at Punt Road. He was pitted against the brilliant Royce Hart and did enough to be awarded a trophy after the match. This called for a speech. The nervous young man tried making a joke about South Australians coming to Victoria to show the locals how to play football. He cringes at the memory of how flat it fell.

Neil's position as a successful footballer and the accident that made him a story of recurring interest to the public has forced him to open up, but he still only answers questions with short phrases and brief thoughts, often including sly asides.

The conversation ranged across topics, from speed camera fines to fund medical research through to player safety in the AFL. People who have worked with him in the disability sector say he approaches issues the same way he did the game – with focus and an outcome in mind. His son Ben believes it is also the organised mind of a tradesman.

When I suggest to Footscray's Laurie Sandilands that his old team mate has achieved much in a quiet way, he corrects me: 'Not a quiet way – a determined way.'

Over several years following that initial meeting, Neil has co-operated with my work at the ABC, appearing in television stories and doing radio interviews. It hasn't always been easy for him to be available at different times and places, but he is always there and always prepared. He seems to sense the moments when he can cash in the currency of his name and spend it on advancing causes.

Most retired athletes remain defined for better or worse by their sport careers. Some chase the golden season forever, seeking

to return to it endlessly through memory or by staying involved in the games. Others become irritated by the continual reminders of what happened in the arena, events from which they have moved on.

One thing few escape are the physical changes that haunt their joints decades after they retired from sport. Their fingers are twisted and their backs bowed; legs that once propelled them now give way. Knees need replacing, ankles and shoulders reconstructing. These injuries are accepted as the price for gladiatorial sport, a by-product that can be tallied as statistics. Each AFL club can expect to have around forty injuries every season that require the player to miss at least one match. In 2014, this averaged out to around 146 games missed. The man who can play on while injured is therefore made legend, but the longer and more gloried the contest, the more likely the player will suffer in their twilight.

Injured players are part of the drama of football. Broadcasters hire doctors alongside commentators, so when a player hobbles off the field the audience can have an instant diagnosis and recovery prognosis. The player, and likely his coach and doctor, are interviewed about the pain and recovery. Once the question of when he will return is answered, then he is left alone.

What happens when the answer to that question is ‘never’?

Neil’s life after football wasn’t the one he chose for himself. In a sense the game chose it for him. He lived the first third of his life believing he had no physical limits, and as a result of that has gone through the rest with strict limits. *How* he lives that life, though, is his decision.

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One Friday evening I come across Neil at the Adelaide Central Market. He doesn't see me because his attention is devoted to his two granddaughters. He is laughing, and one of them hops up and sits on the arm of his chair. As she balances precariously he makes joyful faces at her, pushing through the busy post-work crowds. The shoppers flow around them like a current. When the joy ride stops, Neil looks over and notices me. We chat briefly about domestic life before he tells me he has something to discuss with me at a later date.

A few days after this chance meeting I visit him at his office.

'People have said I should write a book about my life,' he tells me, 'but I don't know if there is much to tell.'

'So I wrote some things down.'

This is his explanation for a few pages of dot points he gives me to read.

They work through his life: from being a child to a parent and grandparent, a footballer meeting the challenges at every level, the patient who became an advocate.

Of the days after his accident:

*I think to accept what has happened there is no good blaming anyone else. It may be caused by someone else, but to me I was partly to blame. Maybe because I accepted that, I got on with life. I had a wife and two kids and I wanted to enjoy their company, so I maintained a positive attitude and got out there and did things. I don't know if that was in my makeup. I have seen a lot of people in hospital who wanted to blame everything else, even though they were part of the accident.*

Later, another one reads:

*By the time I finished I was the fundraising manager responsible for a \$2 million budget and approximately one hundred people. I will always be indebted to Bedford, for giving me and other people with disabilities an opportunity to learn our abilities, and the wisdom to deal with people from all walks of life.*

Then:

*There was a groundswell building up toward doing something for spinal cord injury research ... we started the foundation to raise money for research for a cure for spinal cord injury*

*We funded a \$1.5 million research project which spanned over eight years ... it added considerable knowledge in the area of spinal cord injury research. I do believe it will be possible to return function to an injured person, but it will take some time, a lot of money and a lot more interest from researchers and governments to do the right thing.*

Over the next months we meet regularly, initially in sessions over a coffee. I watch him wheel into his local cafe, having fun with the owner, his voice battling to be heard over the air conditioning, fridges and general clatter. He orders a macchiato and expertly scoops it into one paw, then swings his shoulder around so he can gulp it down in one movement.

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I email a few questions every day, always conscious of the effort it takes Neil to respond. He types laboriously, using his shoulder to steer his stiffened index finger toward the key. He has a headset that he uses to activate voice recognition software. Sometimes the software's attempts to recognise words produce unlikely results. 'Ambulance' becomes 'emblems'; 'eluded' is 'allure'.

One morning, distracted by other matters, I forget to send an email. Soon one arrives for me: *Where are my questions for today?*

To presume this is the story of a brilliant footballer whose career was cut short by cruel misfortune is to place preconceived boundaries on Neil's life. His injury is where most people stop, but it is how he dealt with it and where it took him that defines Neil Sachse.

This is why his name should be remembered.