

Graceful exit with Hird at his best

JON RALPH

ESSENDON'S greatest fear was when James Hird departed it would be kicking and screaming, his dismissal the prelude to a costly unfair dismissal suit.

Yesterday Essendon made the only decision it could, and yet perplexingly it was one of James Hird's finest hours.

Make no mistake, if Hird could see a way clear of this bloody and brutal saga, he would still have been in an Essendon tracksuit instead of navy blue pinstripes at 3.15pm yesterday. But when the inevitable came, Hird's exit appearance was almost note perfect.

It was all at once a reminder of why he could have been a great coach, and why he never could be at Essendon.

The club was able to pitch Hird's decision to resign as a magnanimous gesture, his urgings so relentless they were almost forced to accept his overture to move on.

How noble of them.

And to his eternal credit Hird declined the opportunity for recriminations, chest-beating. Instead he admitted he had come to the realisation many have known for so long: to move on, Essendon had to be a James Hird free zone.

Paul Little pitched it as having a "a fresh start and a clean slate" but Hird wants only that this once-great club to be "a normal football club again"

Now Hird can move on after as graceful an exit as a sacked coach can make.

And by the time the 2016 season rolls around, with little having moved on, this truly will be a club recast in every way since the 2012 supplements program that ruined so

many lives and careers. That pinstripe suit has got a workout before the cameras before, with Hird striding into court to what many believed was a futile battle.

Amid a narrative that Hird was putting himself before the club, it was hard to warm to a coach many have not forgiven for receiving \$1 million not to coach an AFL club.

Yesterday, as his staff watched on and his players huddled behind him, he was softer and more reflective. He spoke of his deep relationships with his players, the extraordinary toll these years have taken on his family, the advice from confidantes that he live a life away from the spotlight.

Tellingly, he passed up the chance to rip into Stephen Dank, to tip buckets on ASADA, joking he was determined not to get into trouble by wading into the dangerous areas where the media tried to lure him.

"I feel the club needed space," he said, revealing he had several times in recent weeks offered his resignation to Little and chief executive Xavier Campbell.

As the losses grew heavier and the players' state of mind grew more dire, the refusals from his bosses grew weaker. Finally, they conceded they did not know if Essendon could move on with him in charge.

No doubt there will be a book – The Word According to Hird – and in truth there needs to be a full and frank explanation from Hird in his own word, with his own context.

Yet even yesterday he was adamant the truth – or as he said, at least his version of it – would only come when it could not adversely affect players.

Heartfelt final words for footy club and team

JAMES Hird used his final address as coach of Essendon to stress his love for the club. This is an edited extract.

"I walked in here as a young 17-year-old in 1991, but Essendon had been in my heart since the day I was born.

On Friday afternoon at Paul Little's office, Paul said it was the board's opinion that the football club would never be truly free of the ASADA issue while I was coach and he was the chairman.

On Monday night I agreed to tender my resignation to the Essendon Football Club.

The year 2015 has been a disappointing year on the field.

Personally – and some of you might disagree – I believe I am a good coach. My record, even through troubled times, is something I am proud of.

My relationships with the players has always been my main focus.

My hesitation at leaving the football club at this time is that I will

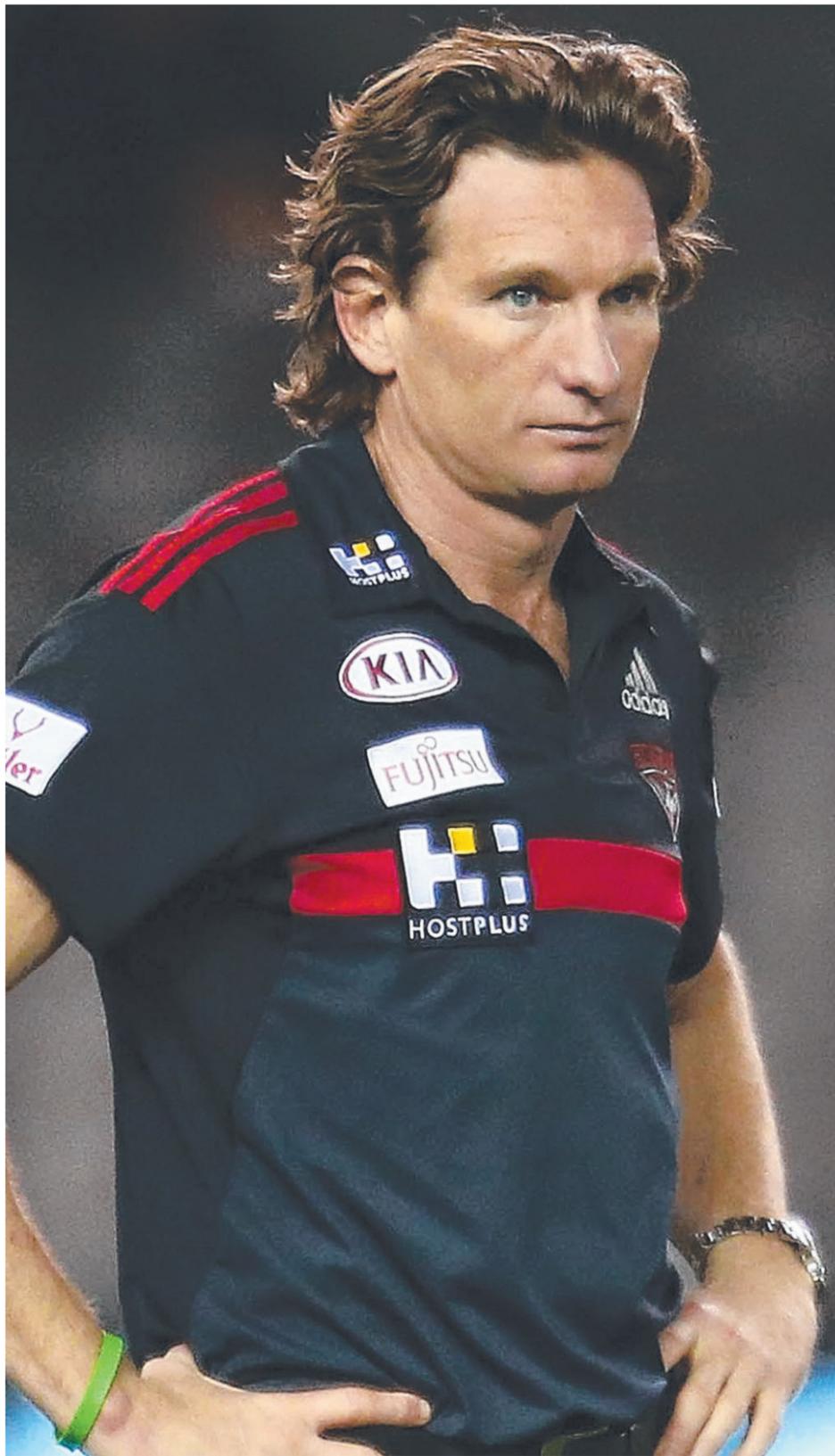
leave the players in a time they still need strong guidance and care, which I hope to continue to provide from a distance. By making the decision to stand down I hope the AFL industry will finally give the players the chance to play football.

To my family and friends, Tania, Stephanie, Tom, Alex and William, I am truly sorry for what you have had to endure.

In making this decision I hope we all get a chance to move on and enjoy how wonderful life really is.

My final message to the players was this: Adversity is a friend that defines who we are. In life you will not always win, you will make mistakes. You will not always have success at a chosen goal. But in our life we allow a challenge or adversity to break us or destroy our life then we have truly failed.

The adversity that we have struggled through has not broken us, so I don't believe we have failed. The Essendon Football Club was a great part of my life and I thank it."



James Hird looks on during Essendon's AFL clash against Adelaide on Saturday. Picture: SCOTT BARBOUR

Expensive bill for not coaching

GRANT BAKER

FOR the second time in three seasons James Hird will receive a massive payment from Essendon NOT to coach the club.

The Bombers' continued haemorrhaging of cash will be a major factor in the decision-making of influential members considering a run at chairman Paul Little's board later this year.

Hird was paid more than \$750,000 to sit out the 2014 season after a ban imposed by the AFL.

His removal as coach yesterday came after the negotiation of a financial settlement that may have stretched into seven figures. He was contracted to coach in 2016.

The payout will be counted in Essendon's footy department spending cap next year.

It is due to be followed by the payment to the AFL of the final \$800,000 instalment of the club's \$2m fine by December 31. Hird earlier this month sued Essendon's insurer over \$640,000 of his legal fees he claims should have been covered. It is not clear whether that dispute was settled as part of yesterday's negotiations.

Essendon is also still footing the bill for mounting legal fees being incurred by the 34 current and former players being pursued by WADA in the long-running doping saga.

The current total cost to Essendon of the ASADA investigation is unknown, but had stretched to \$5m by the end of the last footy financial year on October 31 last year.

Including the two payouts to Hird and the continued high-level legal requirements of the players this year, costs related to the scandal could hit \$8m by the end of this year.

'Shattered' playing group left to ponder what happens next

SAN LANDSBURGER

THE Essendon players' reaction to James Hird's axing yesterday was etched on captain Jobe Watson's face.

As Hird confirmed the AFL's most volcanic coaching career had ended with a 112-point hammering in game No.85, Watson stood to his right fighting back tears.

But while Hird said his departure would give the players a fresh start, Watson admitted

closure could not come until the WADA appeal against 34 players cleared of doping charges was exhausted.

"We won't be able to put it behind us until it's over, no," Watson said. "This whole thing has changed people and no one's for the better."

"What (Hird's) done is try to make it as easy as possible for the players and the fans and the football club to try and move forward and get some of that space."

The 2012 Bombers stood as one behind Watson in March when they were found not guilty of taking a banned drug.

Yesterday the list flanked Hird as crushed individuals who appeared devastated at the Bomber board's unanimous decision.

Downstairs in the club's Hangar earlier, star midfielder Byron Heppell broke down as Hird broke the news to the team. Hird said Heppell felt like a son to him.

As Hird spoke to the media, Jason Winderlich hunched himself against a wall while Dustin Fletcher stared blankly at the ground.

One player in his first season under Hird told the NT News last night a single word encapsulated the group: "Shattered."

Brendon Goddard led the players into the press conference with his arms folded and a look of anger unshakable through the 30-minute fare-

well. It was as clear as Hird's hatred for the AFL – this was not what the players wanted.

"I have a lot of friends in that playing group," Hird said.

"I started playing with Dustin Fletcher and we're very close friends."

"I picked Jobe Watson up for his very first training session. He was late and we got in trouble from Sheeds but I won't hold that against him."

"Brent Stanton wears my number and I love him as a

person and a player. David Zaharakis, although I kick him up the backside for maybe being a bit soft in the contest now and then, he's a terrific person."

"Michael Hurley's an incredible person and I could go on and on. There's a genuine care there both ways."

Asked if Watson felt resentment towards Hird for the supplements scandal which has derailed the club, he said: "I don't feel resentment – I just feel sad."