

LIES AND STATISTICS

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Pulling apart the numbers in the lead-up to the AFL grand final sheds lots of light on why the same clubs rise to the top, writes Robert Macdonald

The Brisbane Lions have the chance to become the first club in 46 years to win three consecutive AFL grand finals. To do so they will have defeated Collingwood twice and Essendon once – as did the great Melbourne Football Club in 1955, '56 and '57.

A Brisbane 'three-peat' would represent a genuine dynasty in the era of equalisation policy. The evenness of the AFL competition is founded upon revenue sharing, the national player draft and the total player payments cap. With only two wins separating second and eighth on the 2003 league ladder, the race for finals positions was arguably the closest since the final eight was introduced in 1994. Yet equalisation works only so far. As with 2002, Port Adelaide were the minor premiers while the Lions and Magpies meet again at the MCG on the last Saturday in September.

So why have the same clubs risen to the top? Skill, form and luck with injuries are important and those who have played team sport will appreciate the value of team cohesion and stability. Formal studies across many professional sports suggest that team cohesion and shared team experience are good predictors of sporting success. Stability – the ability of a club to consistently put the same team on the paddock – allows team strategies and set plays to be perfected and for individuals to learn the playing styles of their teammates. Meanwhile, the psychological benefits of a cohesive unit, a strong team spirit and 'bonding' cannot be denied.

Indicators of cohesion and shared team experience tell an interesting story for today's Grand Final.

Intra-season team cohesion flows from team stability. Consider the 18 players to have played the most senior games in a season. Excluding the Grand Final, the 18 Collingwood players to have played the most senior football in 2003 represented 76.5 percent of the team as opposed to 73.6 percent for Brisbane. Only Adelaide has won a Premiership since 1987 with an intra-season cohesion value of less than 74 percent.

Shared team experience can be estimated as the average number of games played for a club by all those to play senior football for that club in a given season. With a shared team experience level of 107.7 games, Brisbane will become the most experienced Premiership team in the 17 seasons of the national competition. By contrast, the Magpies have a shared team experience level of 68.4 games.

The only teams to win a Premiership with less experience were Carlton (1987), West Coast (1992) and Adelaide (1997-98). Carlton won with a team of seasoned recruits from South Australia whereas West Coast and Adelaide were young clubs with virtual State of Origin teams. A Collingwood victory would be founded upon excellent coaching, drafting and player trading alone.

Who will win? Maybe the AFL knows something we don't – they registered the trade mark 'three-peat' in 1998.

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