

The 'Bentley Bombers' Girls AFL Team
St Philip's College 1996-2020

The Bentley Bombers began at St Philip's College in 1996 and were coached by Garry Bentley a new teacher to the NT who arrived from Melbourne in January 1995.

'Footy' began, following a desperate and persistent request from a delegation of half a dozen girls wanting to learn and play AFL, "like the boys".

It began with six girls and grew over the year to 14, and mostly girls new to the game. The girls fell in love with playing the sport and not just watching. Over the years in Alice Springs goodwill games have been played against other schools such as OLSH, ANZAC High School and ASHS. Later Yirara College and Centralian Middle School would join the competition. Games were eventually played weekly over a short season in winter.

When it was seen that girls could play a passionate, exciting and rigorous game of AFL more girls became interested, often we would have 30 students regularly turn up to training and games. Later on the CAFLNT began to show interest and helped with the development of the game for the girls.

An early driving force were the Indigenous girl boarders from across the NT, from communities as far away as the Tiwi Islands and Broome, as well as Hermannsburg and Santa Teresa who brought their skills and passion to assist in developing new girls in the game. They were so good with their skills some even played in the junior boys' competition.

As coach for 21 years I have always insisted that we train and play like the boys; full on tackling, kicking, handballing and taking "speckies". Initially the girls giggled when told they were allowed to tackle someone to the ground and thoroughly enjoyed a game that did not have offside, stepping and contact laws.

Some of the highlights over the years involved working with the community girls, girls off cattle stations, girls on exchange from South Africa, the UK, the USA, India, Oman and Canada all who enjoyed playing footy so much that they wanted to keep playing when they returned to their home countries.

Other highlights have included players getting excited when Dyson Heppel (current Captain of the Essendon FC) met and talked to the girls in 2011 and then decided to umpire a quarter or two of a practice game. Another famous visitor, Ronnie Burns from Geelong FC, had dinner with the girls in the boarders' dining room and chatted away about football particularly to his cousins from the Tiwi Islands.

Now that AFL for girls has grown into a national sport, I reflect back on the struggles and it's rewarding to see it getting recognition in the wider community and how girls get so much from a contact sport. Many of them now believe they are as skilful as the boys. I once asked a group of girls what they love most about footy and they always say, "It's like you have been in a real physical battle, but most importantly we make new close friendships".

Footy welcomes all body types, offers leadership training, physical conditioning, and a sense of fulfilment all encompassed in a sense of team camaraderie. Today, the Bentley Bombers now enjoys support from the boys and College staff, and even parents turn up expectantly to watch their girls play.

As well as some wonderful coaches over recent years, my all-time hero is Jess Sullivan from Cave Creek station near Mataranka, who, as a young student not only played footy at the highest level in the AFLNT but commentated for the ABC on TV and Radio in Darwin on women's footy matters. As a

senior student she was once refused government funding to support the Bentley Bombers to get new guernseys; she was told officially "girls don't play AFL". Undaunted, and although annoyed, she designed new guernseys in consultation with coach Ms Jen Waterhouse and went looking for a sponsor. After much searching Connellan Trust donated funds to equip all of the team. Her leadership and drive was well respected by all of the girls, families and coaches.

Now girls play on Friday nights in the women's league in Alice Springs and annually compete in the Andrew McLeod Footy Gala Day for school sport.

Footy for young girls is a marvellous pathway for them to gain self-confidence in their abilities, assist in their personal growth and their sense of achievement. Even when games are lost, there is so much for the young players to gain from the experience.

Today, new coaches carry on the traditions at St Philip's College established over 25 years ago, and the current crop of players have no less enthusiasm and passion for the game.

Garry Bentley

Founder of the Bentley Bombers