

# Farewell Hodgey: Long live No. 24

By LEO SCHLINK

Long convinced there were only two certainties in life — taxes and death — Kym Hodgeman has spent the past three months contemplating an equally unpalatable fact.

Twelve weeks after competing for the last occasion at what passed as the height of his considerable twilight powers, Hodgeman accepted his distinguished football career was on an irretrievably downward plane.

Dragged down by the blight of injury — a slipped disc in his back that had the capacity to create an inordinate level of pain — Hodgeman, 34, will unlace the Tiger guernsey for the final time this afternoon and bequeath the familiar No. 24 to a suitable predecessor.

It will, however, be with a sense of relief bordering on elation, rather than sadness that Hodgeman takes his leave.

It has taken 344 league games — 243 with Glenelg, 91 with North Melbourne and nine for South Australia — since 1974 to convince Hodgeman his feet are no longer capable of dancing to the tunes orchestrated in a razor sharp football brain.

Retirement, after a truly splendid career that is appropriately decorated with the 1978 Magarey Medal, the 1974 reserves Magarey Medal and four club best-and-fairest trophies, is no longer repugnant for one of the most energetic, certainly greatest, rovers in Tiger history.

Injury has demanded a passive role of Hodgeman that he initially struggled to embrace less than six months, tragically, after winning his third best-and-fairest award at Glenelg.

More tellingly, the desire to continue has waned recently despite a restoration to something approaching health, if not fitness.

"Basically, it (retirement) has been coming for a long time," Hodgeman said. "Obviously, I thought I could have played the year when I first started, but with the injury I had, I couldn't come back and I suppose during the last four weeks, the enthusiasm hasn't been there to come back again."

If there is one positive aspect of impending retirement, Hodgeman finds it in the prospect of treading the trusted, well worn confines of Glenelg Oval, which will play host, in order, to Hodgeman, Glenelg and Sturt today.

"I'm very honored that the club would allow me to play with the finals coming up," said Hodgeman. "This is the last game I'm going to play. I started my career in '74 and played my first game at Glenelg Oval (against North Adelaide) and it's just nice to play my last game at Glenelg Oval."

"Obviously, I feel pretty humble about it. It's not everyday a club would allow you to play when you've got finals coming up. In my first game, I came off the bench at the 25-minute mark of the last quarter."

"I was a reserve in my first game and I'm going to be a reserve in my last."

For those expecting Hodgeman to exit for with a whimper rather than a bang, the roving maestro is typically mischievous, hinting more at a fringe dwelling approach than full-blooded ankle-level assaults.

"I'm still in pretty good shape, but the fitness won't be there to play a full game," Hodgeman said. "Instead of going in and getting the hard ball, I

might be yelling a bit more 'give me the ball!'"

Described as "exceptionally loyal" by urbane Tiger football director Laurie Rosewarne, a former team-mate, Hodgeman's profile might soon be revive his profile in the coaching sphere.

Hodgeman has retained notes on all the coaches he has played under and, as a consequence, has a plethora of material from which to draw.

"There are too many players like myself who drift away from the game. I have it in the back of my mind that I would like to coach," he said.

"I've had quite a few (coaches). I started with Neil Kerley, I had John Halbert and I had 'Big Nick' (John Nicholls) had before I went to Melbourne (in 1980).

"Obviously, Neil Kerley had the biggest influence on me as a junior. I think everyone knows the respect I have for the man. When I went to Melbourne, Malcolm Blight was my first coach, he coached me for about six months and had an enormous impact on me."

"Then I had Barry Cable and I learnt a lot from him as a rover. He was a tremendous player and I got a lot from him as well, then there was the legendary John Kennedy."

"I've just been so fortunate to have played under so many coaches and then I came back to Glenelg (in 1986) and had Graham Cornes, who I played with and didn't know how to take as a coach, but he's the only coach that I've played under in a winning grand final."

But it was during five seasons at North Melbourne that Hodgeman came to respect and admire the unrelenting brilliance of Blight, whom he assessed as "for sheer skill, pound for pound, was the best footballer I saw."

After idolising Rex Voigt during his footballing infancy, Hodgeman came to appreciate champion ruckman Peter Carey — "pound for pound, the best in Adelaide" — and Sturt great Rick Davies, who was prone to "give you a belt as soon as look at you."

It was also with the Kangaroos, in 1984, that Hodgeman overcame a constant round injuries to win the club's best-and-fairest, six years after the second of his three trophies at Glenelg, in a line-up that included the fabulous Krakouer brothers, Jim and Phil.

There was an 11-season hiatus between best-and-fairest awards at the Bay for Hodgeman, whose resilience and an unsurpassed ability to use the ball with flair and consequence made the then 33-year-old the best rover in the South Australian National Football League competition in 1989.

Rosewarne described Hodgeman's last full season of football as "sensational, a true reflection of his ability."

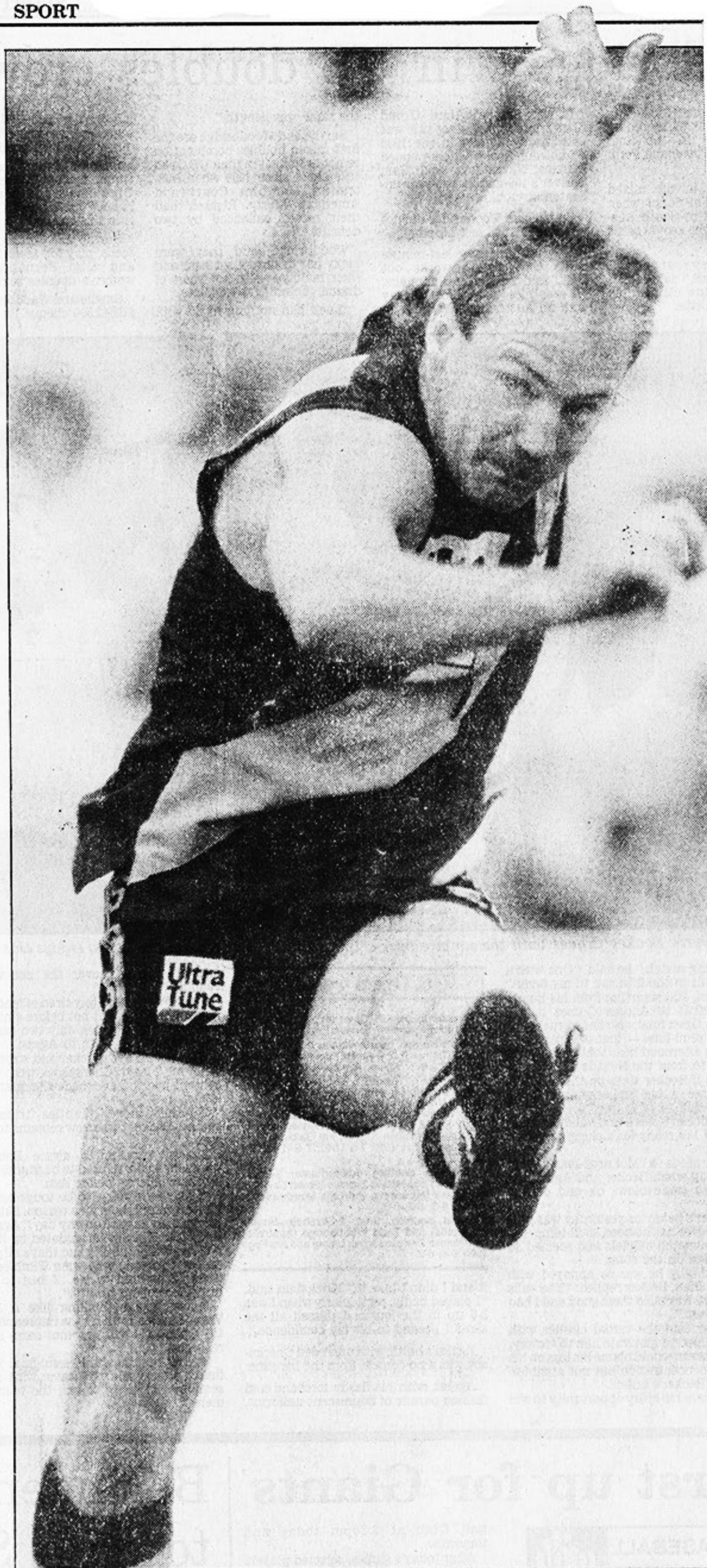
Diplomatic and obliging, Rosewarne yesterday nevertheless verified a story concerning Hodgeman and Fred Phillis that was regarded as apocryphal because of its David and Goliath nature.

"He (Hodgeman) was a cheeky little bastard in his early days," Rosewarne said. "He was always jumping over Fred and taking marks. Fred used to say 'get out of it, you little prick'."

"But 'Hodgy' would keep on doing it."

As of 4.45pm today, 'Hodgy' won't be doing it any longer, more's the pity, but he will depart exalted and revered. "I'm reluctant to play, but the players are quite happy for me to do it," he confided. "But if you look at football as 100 percent of your time, then 70 percent of it is hard work and 30 percent of it is enjoyment."

"So I really want to enjoy this part of it. I'm going out to enjoy it tomorrow."



Tiger champion Kym Hodgeman will play his last game against Sturt at the Bay today.