

lethal weapon

He's coached two teams to a total of four premierships and was named the AFL's Player of the Century. But it's not the trappings and accolades that drive Brisbane Lions coach Leigh Matthews. His will to win is far more personal than that.

Story **Matthew Fynes-Clinton**

Last November, AFL coach Leigh Matthews and 32 of his Brisbane Lions players landed in Papua New Guinea for a notoriously treacherous hike along the Kokoda Track. The trek was devised to entwine "bonds against adversity" after the Lions – premiers in 2001, 2002, 2003 and grand final losers in 2004 – tumbled to place 11th in the 2005 competition.

Matthews, 53, is a thick-moustached, barrel-chested former rover who racked up 332 games and four premierships with Hawthorn, kicked 915 goals (seventh in the all-time goalkicking ranks) and busted a fair bit of face. A legend of the game. The "Player of the Century", as voted by Melbourne's press in 1999. Yet the man they call Lethal was troubled from the moment he chose to join the Kokoda endeavour – a mission, by the way, he didn't have to accept.

"We wanted to send the team," Matthews says, "and because middle-aged and elderly people do it [the track], I thought, 'Well, I should do it, too'."

Even as he thoroughly prepared himself, shedding ten kilograms with a strict dietary and fitness regime, he could not shake his unease. A few weeks later, as he clambered up the last Kokoda hill from hell and reached the top of the jungle trail at Ower's Corner, Matthews, not normally given to public shows of emotion, wept. For six days and 96 kilometres, he had endured squelching mud, beastly

climbs, slippery descents, single-log passes over angry rivers and several lifetimes' supply of ants, mosquitoes and leeches.

But his tears were not prompted by the spirited knitting together of his men. Nor by the ghosts of the 625 World War II countrymen who died on the track staving off the Japanese advance to our shores.

The truth, you see, about Leigh Raymond Matthews is that he is propelled (mercilessly, one suspects) by fear. Fear of failure. He was frightened the cruelties of Kokoda would defeat him. "I was really scared, that it would be terribly embarrassing if I just couldn't go on," he says. "From the time I started, it was just ... getting over the finish line. And at the end, I don't know whether bawling is the right word but it was more than tears in my eyes. Just making it for me was the release of enormous emotion."

It's exactly the same when it comes to footy. For as long as he can remember, Matthews' greatest battle has been with himself. He's obsessed with the contest, but at the heart of every contest is his personal joust with failure. In warding it off, he expends so much energy that the casualty, strangely, is victory. "When you win, mostly it's just mild relief," he says. "I've always thought fear of failure is what drives me. I'm not really a positive thinker. I can't say that fits what I feel about myself. I'm a good devil's advocate. I can usually see the downside of anything first. It's probably a flaw in a way, but that's just the way I am."

Yet as the Lions build to their first premiership round of the year, an away game on Saturday, April 1, against last year's fifth-placed Geelong Cats, Matthews carries no visible worry lines from the disappointment of last season. He is, like many of sport's great coaches, frustratingly enigmatic. Tossed questions outside the zone of football, he mostly zones out. "Oh," he groans, when requested to describe his personality. After five seconds, he offers: "I try not to get too much into self-analysis." Asked to call to mind the happiest day of his life, ten silent seconds pass before a rare moment – Leigh Matthews is stumped: "Nothing popped up."

The Lions' former ace full-forward Alastair Lynch, 37, who retired 18 months ago after a combined 306 matches for Fitzroy and Brisbane, believes the super coach possesses the standard emotional reservoir. It's just that football swamps his focus. "He's very intense about it," Lynch says. "He hates to lose." In other words, hold on to your seats in season 2006. This could be a rocky ride ...

IN A PRE-SEASON RITUAL BEGUN IN 2003, THE AFL sends each of its 16 teams to three-day "community camps" at mainly regional areas around the nation. In short, it's a \$750,000 recruitment march seeking to attract new fans and junior players – as well as ►

In the Lions' den ... Matthews at the Gabba, the home of AFL in Brisbane, as his charges prepare for the start of the 2006 season.



allowing a chance for the kids, supporters, coaches and administrators already signed up to mingle with the game's heroes. There are school visits, open training runs, forums, development activities and, in the case of the Lions' visit last month to Mackay, rounds of beach sport with the locals.

Matthews is right behind the sort of PR generated, especially when his team creeps into a place such as Mackay, population 143,699, key industries tourism, mining and livestock, and part of North Queensland Cowboys rugby league heartland. With more than 1000 AFL club players and another 1123 Auskick (the introductory program for girls and boys) participants, Mackay is opening the door to change. Even better proof, the terms "aerial ping pong" and "Gay FL" are fast disappearing from the native lexicon.

However, at times like these, you won't find Matthews front and centre. During the afternoon's Harbour Beach activities, Anthony Corrie rips up the sand with young fans at volleyball. Luke Power, Nigel Lappin, Jason Akermanis, Richard Hadley and Clark Keating have hijacked the cricket. But Matthews is well away from the action, standing on a grassy verge in front of the surf club. (He couldn't escape the attention of two primary schoolers: "Who's the one with the white hair?" "That's the coach!")

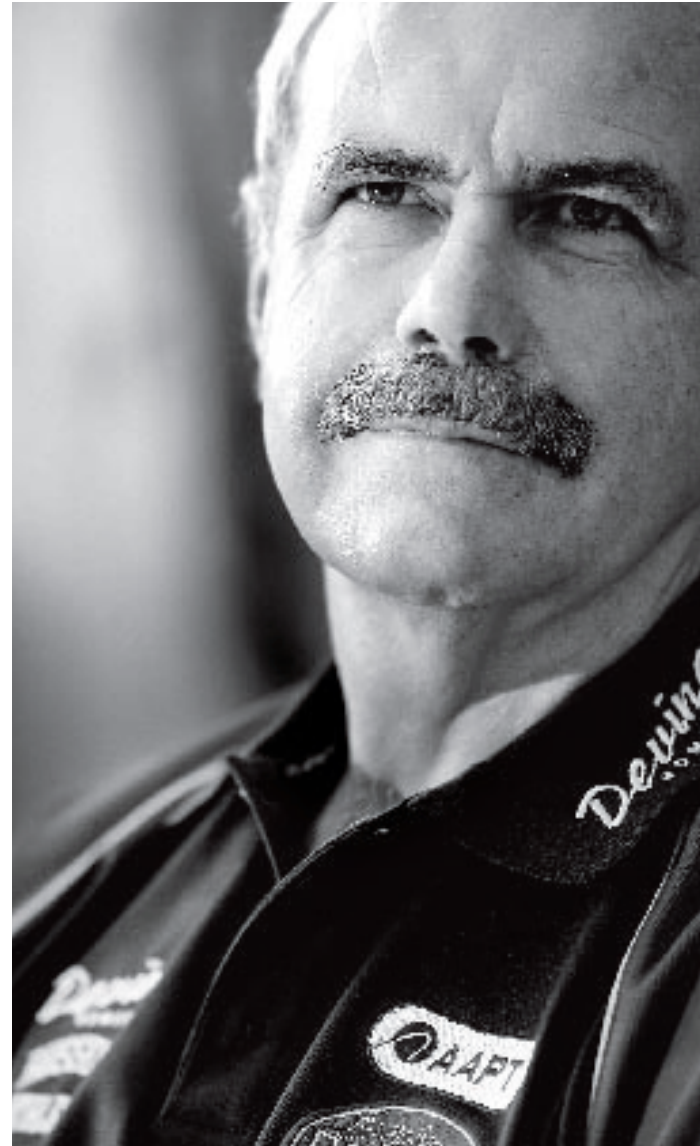
When it comes to his private life, Matthews is usually at his most reticent. Before agreeing to be interviewed for this article, he insisted the subject was off limits. So, sitting across a table at Mackay's waterfront, another maverick moment occurs when he suddenly muses on grandparenthood.

Matthews has two daughters (Tracey, 35 and Fiona, 33) from his first marriage to Maureen. The couple reportedly got hitched young (Maureen was pregnant to an 18-year-old Matthews), separating in 1992 after 22 years. Eleven weeks ago, Tracey had her first child, Isabella. Fiona's children are 18-month-old Ky and seven-year-old Amber. "All of a sudden your kids grow up really quick and therefore your grandkids are, in a way, your kids young again," Matthews reflects. "They are in Canberra and Melbourne and I see them regularly, but it's not for long periods of time. I do miss them a lot."

Matthews then brings up last year's Gold Coast wedding to long-time partner Debbie Jackson. At which point I decide to push a little harder, alluding to his failed marriage by posing the obvious: Getting married was something you were keen to do again? The mood shifts. "Let's not get too heavy," he says.

Game over. Or is it? When I ask the following week for Jackson's telephone number, Matthews obliges. He also passes on the Canberra number for his elder daughter. Tracey Matthews remembers her dad's absences. "He wasn't the sort of father who would get home at 6 o'clock for a family dinner – that was part of the [football] lifestyle," she says. But she recalls a "loving father, very affectionate, patient, playful". People would sidle up to him and inquire whether he ever wished he'd had a son – a next-generation AFL star. "He always said, no, he was happier with girls, because girls he could cuddle more," Tracey says. She digests her parents' split with a dose of reality: "Anybody in public life faces a number of challenges in their private life. Anybody who's very successful and has to spend a lot of time doing something they're very good at ... there's always a cost."

Jackson, 46, a former secretary, has a son Clint, 19,



Left From his earliest playing days to coaching at the elite level, Matthews has been driven by a ruthless will to win.

Right With his pride of Lions, including senior players Michael Voss (to the coach's immediate right) and (clockwise from Matthews' left) Justin Leppitsch, Nigel Lappin and Jason Akermanis.



and daughter Abbey, 15, from a previous marriage. The three relocated, with Matthews, from Melbourne to Brisbane. "It was an attraction at first sight," says Jackson, of meeting Matthews at social tennis 13 years ago. But on the precise nature of the magnetism, she is coy. "Oh, God no," she says. "I'm not going there." She says his foremost qualities are modesty, generosity and unpretentiousness. However, competing for his attention is tricky.

"It can be [tough]," she says. "When he comes home, the television is straight on the football channel. You've got to watch anything and everything to do with football. Your life is wholly and solely built around the football schedule."

"It's his job, it's his passion, it's his. And you know, I love *him*." Still, every mid-to-late season – around June-August – the routine starts to drag. "You

Most of the young players are so scared of him, just because of his history in the game ... He probably gets on better with the players' wives because they don't see him like a legend.

might get a little bit tired of the amount of time it takes from your relationship," Jackson says, "but then I have to correct myself and say, 'Okay, back off.'" She says Matthews cries in warm-fuzzy movies. There's definitely a "soft teddy bear" aspect to him. A romantic? Well, during the couple's European honeymoon he was, says Jackson, "very romantic". "[So] he can be," she chortles, "when he wants to be."

SHAUN HART, 34, THE NOW-RETIRED INTREPID Lions' midfielder who won the Norm Smith Medal as best on ground in the 2001 grand final, says that every move Matthews makes – in the football stratosphere, at least – is calculated for the betterment of his players. "He's a pretty humble man," Hart says.

The way Matthews sees it, he's a facilitator – charged with eliciting the best on-field performance. If that's happening, his job is done. The players reap the success and adulation. It's how it should be.

"The coach in team sport is the figurehead," Matthews says. "That's it." He follows this line of modesty to a surprising end. "There's good fortune in life that follows us," he says. "I mean, I came up to Brisbane and great success has followed. Now, I'm not stupid enough to think that great success

would not have happened with someone else. I'm not *that* egotistical."

The flip side is that Matthews, of course, does have an ego. It surfaces every now and then, with the edges smoothed off by a self-conscious titter. "People say you've got an aura. What does that mean to you?" I ask. "I find it interesting. I quite like it. I'm happy with that." And Player of the Century? "I love it. Absolutely. To have that tag is just ... fantastic."

He coughs up a story involving defender Justin Leppitsch in a Melbourne hotel lift following the Lions' third consecutive premiership in 2003. "It was three hours after the grand final, so I'd had a few Crown Lagers and we were mucking around," Matthews says. "I was feeling pretty good about life and so was he. And he said, 'Where would you be without us?' And I said, 'Leppa, all I'd be is Player of the Century.'" Matthews smiles – his eyes crinkle beautifully when he smiles. "He [Leppitsch] liked that. He thought it was a good answer."

BUT THAT WAS MORE THAN TWO YEARS AGO – AND no-one understands the fickleness of football better than Lethal Leigh. The last time the Lions officially went around, in 2005's final home-and-away fixture, they copped a 139-point thrashing from St Kilda at Melbourne's Telstra Dome. Brisbane lost 12 of their 22 matches last season, sentencing Matthews to far

more sessions in his self-torture chamber than he had a right to anticipate.

"When we lose, you know, you have this day or so of just withdrawing into a dark cave," he says. "I'm miserable, don't want to talk to anybody, am really poor company. Anyone else who's around you knows you're in a dark mood. It's like, 'Leave me alone. I'll cope with this. Just leave me alone'. But the day after, I'll start to come out of it. You think, 'What can we do about it?' The planning part of you pops up."

While the off-season lacked the familiar smack of satisfaction, missing the grand final for the first time in five years has far from deterred him. Matthews has dealt typically with the situation: looking at himself first. His players say that, as a rule, he's not a ranter. But Matthews confesses he lost the plot when his team went to the half-time sheds nine goals down in that capitulation against the Saints (the losing margin would be more than 21 goals). "I just got angry and allowed my anger to overflow on to the players," he says. "I thought the last few weeks of the year, I didn't coach all that well. I sort of fell into the trap of coaching on frustration and disappointment."

So where did the rot begin? Matthews makes reference to, not excuses about, the Lions' injury toll (Beau McDonald and Hadley, who missed the entire season with cruciate knee problems; Chris Scott's

hamstring, Leppitsch's bad back, Simon Black's calf and Jared Brennan's torn quad, among others). Critically, Black (round four) and the enforcing Jonathan Brown (round six) made late starts due to suspensions incurred in the 2004 grand final.

Matthews has made over his support crew, while no finals commitments last September have left the team fresher (captain Michael Voss's problematic right knee has rarely been better) and delivered a bonus month of pre-season training. The coach refuses to accept that he hung on too long to the coterie of elite senior players that steered the Lions' premiership trifecta. "You've got to make hay while the sun shines," Matthews says. Even if the strategy has since polarised the roster, with the remnants of that group (following retirements) at one extreme and at the other, a band of young, comparatively inexperienced players.

Instead, he'll be searching for a specific on-field ingredient to best gauge what sort of recovery the Lions are headed for. "Last year," he says, "because we were playing badly, players stopped trusting their teammates, they stopped trusting themselves. Is the trust back? It's only in the heat of [premier season] battle that you know. We don't know that yet."

The statement is vintage Matthews: the chief Lion wagging his cautionary tale. Waiting and seeing before believing. The sort of restrained pragmatism that ►

leaves you wondering how Brisbane's more out-there characters, such as dyed-blond midfielder Akermanis, might respond. "You don't always agree on things," says the 29-year-old Brownlow medallist. "[Our] philosophies have sometimes not been on par."

At a mayoral reception for the team in Mackay, Akermanis had impressed the throng with his assertion that the Lions were "15 to 20 per cent better off" in their pre-season preparation than at the same time last year. Reminded of the remark at a press conference 30 minutes later, Matthews just grinned. "I wish!" he said.

ONLY TWO CURRENT LIONS PLAYERS – LEPPITSCH and Voss – were among the 50 invitees at Matthews' wedding last October. "It was a really well-done night – very classy," Leppitsch says. "It was one of the few times you get to see the different side of Leigh Matthews. I don't think I've ever seen him kiss anyone before."

Matthews and 30-year-olds Voss and Leppitsch form the Lions' leadership triumvirate, with the latter describing his relationship with Matthews as a "mutual respect that has turned into a friendship". But even Leppitsch confesses: "[Matthews] is a harder man to get to know off the field." Voss quips: "I can't say I've ever had a drinking session with him. We don't hang out and look at the girls together."

Any professional coach, Leppitsch surmises, must generally keep an "arm's length" from those effectively in his employ. "He [Matthews] can't be best friends with everybody," he says. However, the thrice All-Australian centre-halfback raises a point which is backed up by past guns such as Lynch. They suggest the twinge of discomfort some players feel when approaching the coach may not necessarily be Matthews' fault. "Most of the young players are so scared of him," Leppitsch explains, "just because of his history and his aura in the game ... that they find it very hard to open [up] to him. It's quite funny; he probably gets on better with the players' wives because they don't see him like a legend of the game. They see his personality a lot more."

Nonetheless, when it gets down to the actual business of coaching football teams, few cut through better than Matthews.

Voss: "He reads groups well and gives fantastic direction. He's always backing you up. It's like he's out there with you."

Lynch: "A guy with that much experience and knowledge, you trust him. He puts things across well to the group and has everyone pointing in the one direction. He makes you believe."

Hart: "[Matthews has] an understanding of what wins football games and a great ability to put that message across to players. Exceptional coach. Exceptional leader."

Leppitsch: "He doesn't profess to be a dictator. A lot of coaches like to be doctor, physio, coach, conditioning staff and the full works. He lets people do their jobs ... He's got patience, he listens to players' views." Meaning you can challenge his decisions? Leppitsch laughs. "I wouldn't say 'challenge'," he says.

Matthews performed his earliest footballing feats for suburban Chelsea, in Melbourne's south-east. At the age of 12, he was a flyweight wingman copping regular poundings in the under 16s. Within three years, the tree-trunk legs had taken root and his chest



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had expanded to gladiatorial proportions. He was just 17 when he won his first-grade spurs for Hawthorn. Like all champions, Matthews possessed peerless skills and, almost as importantly, a transcendent presence that would invariably materialise in a tight spot. "He was," says Lions' football manager Graeme Allan, "the Wally Lewis of Victoria."

Matthews' nimble wielding of his wrecker's ball of a physique would become the hallmark of his play. His snapping of a timber point post is folklore (the legend has superseded reality, claims Matthews: "All I did was bump into it and it split at the joint"). But not all incidents were so celebrated. For much of his Hawks' service – which spanned 1969 to 1985 and included eight club best-and-fairest awards – Matthews, just 178cm tall, was the most intimidating footballer the game had known. Chasing the ball, he had a steamrolling momentum augmented by powerful forearms, elbows ... and sometimes fists. A certain infamy grew, and in his final year he plumbed the depths – breaking the jaw of Geelong's Neville Bruns with a brutal off-the-play punch. Matthews was deregistered for four matches, charged by police and fined \$1000 after being convicted of criminal assault.

"I had the classic white line fever," says Matthews, who owes the "Lethal" moniker to both his scoring prowess and aggression. "I've always been a fairly passive person off the field but I've had a ruthless will to win from when I was a little kid – and I don't think it's changed. It just came out in me on the field. I'd do things and think, 'What did I do that for?' Rushes of blood certainly characterised my playing career. I plead guilty. They were never premeditated, but things happened on the spur of the moment that I clearly wish hadn't. I don't mind admitting that."

In the season after his playing retirement, Matthews dived straight into coaching and in 1990 took the Magpies to their first premiership in 32 years.

Newlyweds ... With his new wife Debbie Jackson, who says "Lethal" Leigh can be very romantic "when he wants to be".

Five years later, the Pies finished 10th and Matthews got the sack. From 1996, he spent more than two years in media roles: TV commentator, radio caller and newspaper columnist. But by midway through season '98, the Brisbane Lions' committee men were desperately seeking a solution for a club whose football arm was wracked by infighting and dismal performances (the Lions went on to be wooden spooners, having made the finals in their previous, debut year – following the Brisbane Bears-Fitzroy Lions merger).

Matthews was hired to replace caretaker coach Roger Merrett (coach John Northey had been fired after 11 rounds of 1998) in a reputed \$1.5 million, three-year deal. Yet neither money, nor the playing list, was at the core of his commitment. What he sought was the imprimatur to build an empire his way. He says: "All I wanted to know from them [the Lions' executive] was: 'Are you going to let me run the football operation? And can you fund what I'm going to do? If the answer's yes to both of those questions, well, I'm in'."

In his first year, Matthews hoisted the Lions to fourth place on the back of a finish that included ten straight wins. Home crowds at the Gabba increased by 31 per cent, with nine of 13 games there sold out. In 2000, another finals berth resulted – as Lions crowds outstripped those at Brisbane Broncos home fixtures – opening the way to the "three-peat" premierships, followed by another grand final appearance (albeit a loss to Port Adelaide) in 2004. A triumphant short history; maybe twice as good again, considering the rough odds of any Melburnian and his game drilling so rapidly into Queensland's rugby league bedrock.

IT'S 4.20PM ON WEDNESDAY AT HARRUP PARK, Mackay's Aussie Rules Central, and 300 fans are watching the Lions train. Mid-field, Matthews calls his troops together. There's a question-and-answer forum on tonight at the local high school, but the event will involve only the coach and a sprinkling of players. With a steely glare, Matthews says that for those not at the forum, "I wouldn't have thought you'd be leaving the hotel. This [the Mackay trip] is a public relations exercise, not a socialising exercise. Right. No confusion about that?" A team member confides that what he likes most about Matthews is his decisiveness. "When things are up in the air a bit," the player remarks, "he takes control."

Whatever the fate of the Lions this year, Matthews (signed to the end of 2008) is unlikely to deviate from custom. His players win – he'll be relieved. They lose – he will feel under siege. And neither reaction will pay any heed to the external expectations of fans, corporate sponsors or the Lions administrative machine.

Matthews' inner quest remains the main game. Although, to be honest, it doesn't sound like a lot of fun. He seems captured, no matter what. "I'm certainly a victim of winning and losing," he says. "Putting yourself on the line ... that's the compulsion. The competition in my life is a bit of a drug. A natural upper. So the good things that have happened in the past are really only ... nice memories. I find they don't give me a lot of ongoing satisfaction. I want the fresh feel-goods. I still crave that." ■