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JASON AKERMANIS

Jason Akermanis is an electrifying speedster who is one of the most decorated players produced in Queensland.

Raised in the inner northern suburbs of Brisbane by his sole parent mother Shona, Akermanis has matured into a Brownlow Medallist, dual premiership player, and triple All-Australian representative. Akermanis was a marked man through 2003 as one of the Lions' gun midfielders and finished outside the top 10 in best and fairest voting for the first time since 1998.

However, he still was a contributor throughout the season and was one of the stars of Grand Final day. He booted five brilliant goals and was marginally behind Simon Black for best on ground honours.

His 2002 season was not as well rewarded as the previous year, when he won the Brownlow Medal, yet his effort to make the All-Australian side was outstanding when compared to recent Brownlow winners. Akermanis broke a four-year trend of Brownlow Medallists struggling the following season by booting a career best 49 goals and proving a constant threat in mostly a half-forward role.

He dazzled early in the season despite an acne medication producing weight problems early on, but had his momentum stopped twice by suspensions – for kneeing Eagle Daniel Kerr in Round 5 and Richmond's Craig Ednie in Round 15.

Akermanis was close to best afield in the qualifying final win over Adelaide with 25 possessions and nine tackles, but was quieter in the preliminary and grand final wins. However, his adductor muscle was torn badly in the opening minutes of the grand final, but he remained on the ground despite struggling to kick with his right foot. Yet he will long be remembered in history as the man who clinched the sealing goal of the best grand final since 1989 when he snapped a goal over his left shoulder at the 23-minute mark of the nine-point win over Collingwood.

Akermanis became just the second Queenslander behind skipper Michael Voss to win the coveted Brownlow Medal in 2001. It was a popular win for the excitement machine, who showed enormous maturity with the way he conducted himself after the sensational victory. He topped off the most memorable week of his life with a premiership medallion, running amok in the last quarter of the Grand Final win over Essendon.

If he'd written the script himself he could barely have done a better job! The dashing midfielder won a thrilling Brownlow Medal count on 24 September, polling 23 votes to edge out Adelaide's Andrew McLeod by two, with 1996 winner Voss (19) a close third. A three-vote haul in Round 21 against Geelong at Shell Stadium got him across the line after he had led for much of the count, only to be overhauled by McLeod. He polled nine times from 21 games he played, missing Round 20 through injury. Five times the umpires voted him best afield - against Geelong (Rd6), Sydney (Rd7), West Coast (Rd11), W/Bulldogs (Rd18) and Geelong (Rd21). He also received two votes four times - against Port Adelaide (Rd1), Fremantle (Rd5), Adelaide (Rd9) and Port Adelaide (Rd16).

Yet it was only one highlight of an extraordinary year in which the 1999 All-Australian back pocket specialist became one of the AFL's premier midfielders, playing a pivotal role in the rotation with Voss,

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Simon Black and Nigel Lappin that became the most lethal group in the competition. He averaged 21.2 possessions, 4.3 marks, 3.2 HBGs and 4.4 clearances, invariably running his opponent off his feet with a blistering second half performance. And he also kicked 28 goals from 24 games (including two in the Grand Final) to rank fourth at the club behind Lynch, Daniel Bradshaw and Jonathan Brown.

The dasher won his second All-Australian 'jumper', finished 4th in the Lions B&F behind Voss, Black and Lappin (and was more than happy to do so), and won club awards for 'Most Professional Player' and 'Most Effective Tackles'. His only miss for the year was the International Rules series against Ireland due to a suspension incurred in the corresponding 2000 series in Dublin, yet wasn't too worried because it left the door open for a 12 October wedding to girlfriend Megan Legge.

The young, home-grown AFL product underwent an extraordinary transformation in 1999 from a promising but sometimes erratic wingman/forward to the best back pocket player in the game and one of the most decorated players in the League.

Then, in 2000, in his sixth AFL season, he consolidated his standing as one of the top players in the club. Despite a nagging quadricep problem which sidelined him for three weeks early in 2000 and made running difficult, he ultimately finished seventh in club champion voting despite receiving a lot more attention from opposition players. While that might pale against his record in 1999 when he shared the Merrett/Murray Medal with Justin Leppitsch as the Lions Club Champion, was named the Lions 'Best Finals Player', finished 13th in the Brownlow Medal, was chosen in the All-Australian side, and won the 'Jim Stynes Medal' as Australia's best player in the two-Test International Rules series against Ireland, the man himself was happy with his form because of the extra pressure he was put under. That learning curve obviously helped his game in his amazing 2001.

All that after his first four years in the League saw him twice finish 11th in the Bears/Lions B&F Award and three times win Allies State of Origin selection, and each year have an almost obligatory stint when he was dropped from the AFL side. He had shown glimpses of huge talent and genuine excitement, but too often, he admitted, his good was intermingled with the not so good.

Born in Mildura, he moved to Queensland with his mother and brother at the age of nine. He learned his football with QAFL club Mayne, where he enjoyed a stand-out junior career topped off by a sensational performance at the 1994 Australian U17 (Teal Cup) carnival, where he won the Queensland B&F award and All-Australian selection.

He was claimed by the Brisbane Bears prior to the 1994 National Draft on a Queensland zone concession, and by Round 4 of the 1995 season he had made his AFL debut while still doing Year 12 at Nudgee College, one of the traditional strongholds of schoolboy rugby union in Queensland. In his first season at the elite level he played 17 games, including the Bears' first final.

In 1996, utilising his blistering pace and high skill level to maximum benefit, he moved to the next level, securing a regular senior position as a wingman / half forward / on-baller. After an outstanding start to the season he was rewarded with selection in the Allies State of Origin side which played Victoria at the MCG. At 19, he was the youngest member of the Allies side, and was among the team's better performers.

In 1997, after a slow start, he again won Allies selection for the win over WA in Perth, and finished the year on a high when he kicked a season-high four goals to be among the club's better performers in the qualifying final loss to St Kilda. Kicked 20 goals from 17 games in his third season, again finishing 4th on the club goal-kicking list behind Leppitsch, Daniel Bradshaw and Jarrod Molloy, and posted his 50th AFL game in round 18 against Hawthorn at the GABBA. And all that despite the early season death of his mother and No.1 fan Shona after a long battle with cancer.

It was more of the same in the Lions' disappointing campaign of 1998. Despite a huge preparation that saw him at an all-time fitness level, he was dropped from the seniors in Rounds 4-5. He regained his spot, but it wasn't until the last 10 minutes of the Round 12 draw against Port Adelaide that he produced his best. He was best afield in the Lions' win at Cardinia Park the following week to earn selection in a depleted Allies line-up but after starting in the centre he spent much of the game on the bench and by Round 19-20, after an untimely one-match AFL suspension, he was back in the QSFL again. He finished 11th in the B&F count but his season figures of 17 games and 12 goals were precisely the same as his first season.

Leigh Matthews arrived in Brisbane for the 1999 season and pulled what eventually proved to be a masterstroke, switching the young tearaway to the back pocket to pick up the quick, opposition goal-sneaks. It took time. Akermanis was dropped from the top side after the Ansett Cup campaign but was recalled for the start of the premiership and assigned the job on St Kilda speedster Aussie Jones. He didn't look back, and but for a one-game absence with injury, he was an automatic selection. There wasn't a game where 'Aker' had his colours lowered as at last he found the consistency that had been lacking from his game.

He dominated the Lions' end-of-season awards dinner, also claiming The Courier-Mail / Great Keppel Island Player of the Year Award. And in the Brownlow Medal count he jumped to 4th spot on the leaderboard after Round 13 and finished 13th overall despite not adding another vote. His pace and skill was perfectly suited to the International Rules game, and he was one very satisfied young man as he reflected on the year in which he made good in what was very much a make-or-break campaign. On reflection, Akermanis' admitted that a good, solid relationship off the field with Megan and her family had helped enormously in consolidating his football.

A full-time footballer, he has completed some terrific community work with team-mates in the Life's A Ball and BeyondBlue programs, initiatives aimed at speaking to troubled high school students and trying to help set them on the right track with their lives.

Akermanis also has a strong media role, writing for The Courier-Mail, and contributing to Channel 10 and Triple M.