

AFL Hawthorn: Things change but top-four goal stays the same for Hawks

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From one season to the next the change at Hawthorn has been seismic. Though for all the change one thing Hawthorn expects not to alter is the strike at the top four.

Some change was forced upon the club, other changes the club brought upon itself, but the constant according to president Richard Garvey is that Hawthorn still believe they are a realistic contender this year.

Since the last time Hawthorn played two of the club's greatest champions, Sam Mitchell – last year's best and fairest winner – and Jordan Lewis have left, as has another triple premierships player, Bradley Hill. Last year's football director is now coaching Brisbane. The chief executive is now running the MCG.

"Playing lists, players, come and go – we had retirements the year before," Garvey said on the eve of the club's first pre-season game.

"In the off-field I think people forget we have had Mark Evans, Brendon Bolton, Leon Cameron, Luke Beveridge – there's been a series of people leave our footy club and I still think we are pretty well-positioned. Yes, we have to find a new CEO and we have started with that process.

"But we are still aiming for top four. Our aim will be top four. We shall see. A lot of other clubs are aiming for the same thing but ... that's our aim. The world shifts very quickly in football but we would be reasonably happy we prepared the best we can."

The changes to the list, he said, were essential to keep the top-four ambition viable, for while Mitchell, Lewis and Hill went out Jaeger O'Meara, Tom Mitchell and Ty Vickery came in.

Garvey said the moves the club made were out of necessity to keep pace with changes in the game. The fact it involved significant figures of the club made it difficult, but he is content the changes were correct.

"On the field we will find out but I think if we hadn't made the changes we ran a much greater risk. If we had not made the changes we were watching the game change and our capacity to move with it would have been severely impacted so we have reset," Garvey said.

"We have got four experienced players come to the club who are all terrific individuals. We are quite confident we are going to be up there challenging. That is our aim and we want to stay at the forefront of the competition both on and off the field.

"Yeah we lost that game to Geelong by a kick but we were comprehensively shown up by the Bulldogs and actually earlier in the year by GWS, so we knew the game was changing and Alastair [Clarkson, coach] has spoken publicly about that.

"We did a lot of soul-searching in that situation but you balance it up by thinking the danger is if we hang on to too many of the older players for too long ... you can drop right down the ladder and then it is much harder to climb back up. So to keep ourselves renewed, so we had to go through that.

"But at the same time we had regard to these players who were absolute icons of the club, champions of the club and making sure their futures were assured

"It wasn't a knee-jerk reaction I can tell you that. It was something we had been thinking about and looking at for quite some time. It goes back even to 2015 when we were looking at the age of our list and doing some planning for the future. At that stage I think we had six players over 30 and how are we going to deal with it? What does it look like?"

Hawthorn re-signed Mitchell early last year only to trade him for little trade compensation at the end of the season.

Garvey said this was about helping Mitchell into the next phase of his career with an opportunity to transition into coaching with West Coast.

"I was kept informed about what was happening as it unfolded and I understood the reasoning behind it. I think you have got to trust the leadership of your club. People like Clarko, Graham Wright, they are the best in the game. You have to back your people and I think that is one of our strengths."

Garvey said the process for a new chief executive was under way but an appointment would take some months.

AFL football operations manager Mark Evans – a former football director at Hawthorn who retains strong connections to Clarkson and other key figures at the club – has been touted for a possible return.

"Doug Evans would be one of a number of outstanding candidates should he choose to go for the role," Garvey said.

"I have not had a proper discussion with him. I know him, but we haven't had that discussion. Lots of things have been mooted but that will need to play out over time.

"We want the best person ... we think that process is going to take a couple of months and we are not concerned about that. We need a measured and careful process."

Garvey said the new CEO needed a background in elite sport and an understanding of football culture.

The chairman of Vaughan construction company, Garvey has adopted a low profile since assuming the president's role from Andrew Newbold last year; he was mistakenly referred to as Andrew Garvey (the former *Age* racing writer) in one media reference recently. It was an understandable error for Garvey has preferred to be under the radar.

On the eve of the new season he is happy to talk through the significant changes at the club.

"I am very happy about the way we have prepared for this year. With what we have done, I am happy that we have been prepared to take those decisions we needed to take to bring those new players in and to reset," Garvey said.

"I am really positive about the way the boys and the whole footy department have handled the off-season, prepared for the season and reset our list if I can put it that way."

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/afl/afl-hawthorn-things-change-but-topfour-goal-stays-the-same-for-hawks-20170216-guelx3.html>