

Local AFL stars launch into 2024

The 2024 AFL season kicks off in earnest tonight, as the opening round starts with Sydney hosting Melbourne. In readiness for the season, and to tie in with the launch of the Steeline SE Voice footy tipping competition - which boasts a \$2000 first prize - sports journo Will Boston takes a look at our Limestone Coast footballers set to grace the national stage

Jordan Dawson - Robe

Coming off the back of a stellar 2023 season Jordan Dawson will be looking to continue to grow as the captain of the Crows and will be looking to lead them into playing finals footy this year.

Dawson had a career best season last year, averaging 27.1 disposals and 6.7 tackles a game.

Although Dawson did not finish very high in the Brownlow last season, only polling 20 votes, he still took home the Malcolm Blight Medal at the club's Best and Fairest night.

After an up and down 2023 season the Crows still have areas to improve on from last season.

"We are looking to sharpen up our defensive side of the game. I think that just comes with a little bit of experience, as well," Dawson said.

This should be one of the many challenges for the Crows skipper as he spent less time in the backline last season than previous years and will look to be playing more in the midfield this year.



LACHIE NEALE

Lachie Neale - Apsley

In 2023 Lachie Neale had a down year stats wise from the prior season but that did not stop him from claiming his second Brownlow with 31 votes.

To add to an impressive season Neale and the Lions made it to the grand final. Unfortunately the Lions fell to the Pies in a heartbreaking four point loss.

In 2024 Neale will have his sights set on making it back to the grand final as the team is looking to continue its 2023 form.

Although Neale had a statistically worse season than the prior year, the star midfielder still put up elite numbers, averaging 26.7 disposals and a career high 7.9 clearances.

Neale will have to work hard to keep up his numbers in the midfield this season with Brisbane having a stacked midfield with players like Dunkley, Zorko and Ashcroft all looking to contribute.

A result of Neale and the midfield's work last year saw the Lions ranked first in clearances for the season.

This goes in hand with the Lions also being ranked second in points and inside 50s. All of this should make the Lions a hot favourite to win the flag in 2024.

Mitchell Hinge - Mundulla

After being delisted by the Brisbane Lions in 2021 Mitchell Hinge was picked up by the Crows and has slowly been carving a role for himself in the team's backline.

Hinge began the year by extending his contract with the Crows until 2026.

Over the past two years Hinge has begun to stand out as a major player in the Crows' defence.

Last year Hinge put up elite numbers in contested and intercept possessions.

As Hinge continues to improve every season at the Crows it's hard to believe that he has only played 43 games of AFL footy. Coming into 2024 Hinge will look to take charge of the Crows' back line this year and for many more years to come.

This year will also see Hinge in a new role as he joins the team's leadership group for 2024, joining his SE teammates Dawson and Fogarty.

Lincoln McCarthy - Bordertown

In 2023 Lincoln McCarthy had a pretty similar season to years prior.

Last season McCarthy kicked 28 goals with a shot accuracy of 62.2%, his highest percentage while at the Lions.

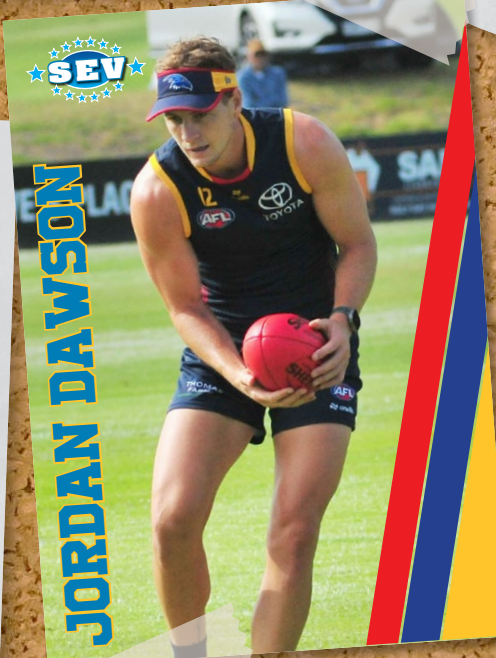
McCarthy also made a difference beside kicking goals last season.

His 104 score involvements in 2023 helped the Lions in being ranked second in the league at points per game.

Although McCarthy's side lost in the grand final last season he still had a great finals campaign.

McCarthy kicked five goals over three games in the finals with two of them coming in the grand final.

After heartbreak last season Lincoln McCarthy will be coming into 2024 with hopes of claiming his first premiership.



JORDAN DAWSON

Mason Redman - Millicent

Mason Redman will be coming into the 2024 season with a new contract.

The Bombers defender inked a new contract in July last year after turning away from free agency and will remain at the club until 2028.

In 2023 Redman averaged a career high in kicks per game with 16.5.

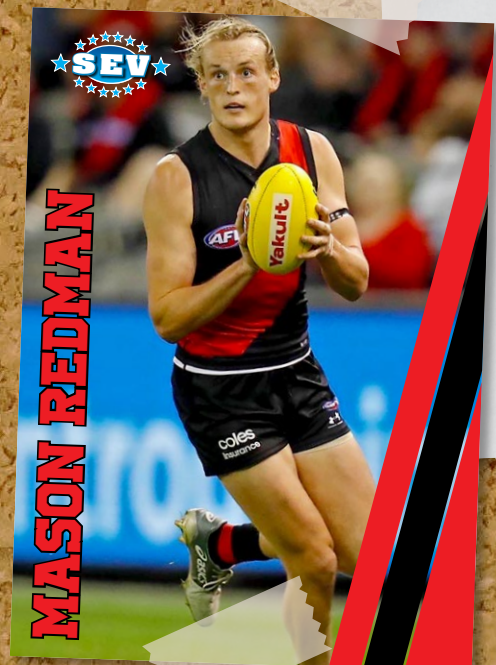
Redman also led his team in metres gained with 472.9 last season too.

Some other highlights for Redman last season was placing third in the Crichton Medal and being awarded the Adam Ramanauskas Most Courageous Player.

Redman is heading into his ninth pre-season, an impressive effort not lost on him.

"I was reflecting on that over the break, it's gone very quickly. I can still remember my first pre-season, people said they would get easier but they have not really, you just get a little bit smarter," he said.

With the team starting off strong last season and eventually finishing 11th on the ladder, Redman will be looking to contribute to the team in winning a finals match, something that has not happened since 2004.



MASON REDMAN

Jeremy Cameron - Dartmoor

Since leaving GWS and joining Geelong in 2021 Jeremy Cameron has shown why he is one of the best forwards in the AFL.

Last year Cameron led the team in goals, kicking 53 for the season which was lower than the prior year but Cameron did miss two games due to a concussion in round 15.

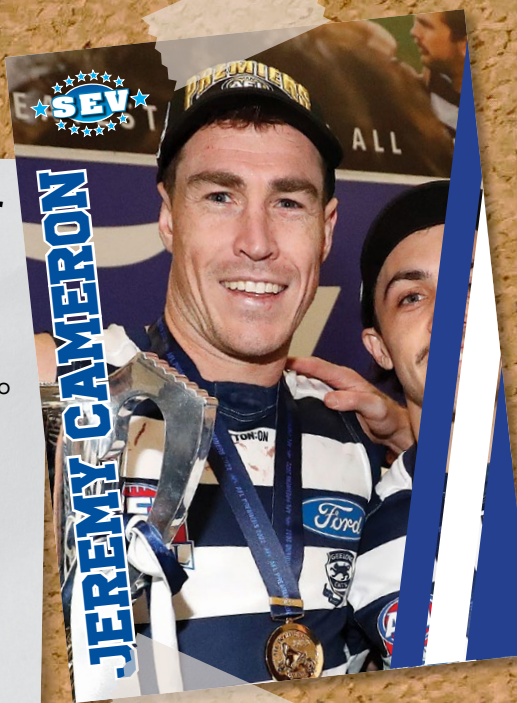
Still an impressive achievement to do.

Last season Cameron was ranked 9th in the league for inside 50 marks, which helped boost his goal kicking tally.

Even though the team had a poor year Cameron was still able to produce a good season.

This season Cameron has a special milestone ahead of him as he enters the 2024 season on 230 games and if he can stay fit throughout the season he will be looking at playing his 250th game late into the year.

After a disappointing 2023 season for the Cats, Cameron will be looking to lead his side back to the finals in 2024.



JEREMY CAMERON

Rowan Marshall - Portland

Over the past couple of seasons Rowan Marshall has cemented himself as one of the best rucks in the AFL.

In 2023 Marshall ranked in the top 10% for ruckmen in nearly every stat. Marshall has been a Swiss army knife for the Saints with his ability to impact the game on every part of the field.

Marshall has proven that he can be a threat when he heads up forward, ending last season by kicking a goal in seven of his last eight games.

Although Marshall is not statistically the best ruckman at ruck contests he picks up the slack with his ability to impact the game with his ball skills.

Marshall is like another midfielder for the Saints with the way he can open up the play and find teammates with his kicking accuracy.

Last season Marshall averaged 13.1 kicks and five clearances a game, proving to everyone that he is a different breed of ruckman.

Heading into his eighth season Marshall will look to build off the success of the Saints last season as he joins the leadership group in 2024.



LUKE PEDLAR

Luke Pedlar - Kingston

Luke Pedlar has become an important piece for the Crows forward line after an impressive 2023 season.

After being drafted in 2020 Pedlar found it hard to break into the senior team at Adelaide.

In 2021 and 2022 Pedlar only played five senior games, spending most of his time in the SANFL.

In 2023 Pedlar got his big break as he played round 1 and continued to stay in the side throughout the year, ending the season with 21 games under his belt.

After an impressive season Pedlar extended his contract with the Crows, signing on through to 2026.

In 2023 Pedlar contributed 25 goals and 100 score involvements.

Another highlight from last season was in round 16 where Pedlar was awarded a rising star nomination.

Now with a full season under his belt Pedlar will look to build off last season with the Crows having finals aspirations in 2024.



Brad Close - Mount Gambier

Heading into his fourth season in the AFL Brad Close will be looking to bring a spark back to Geelong's forward line in 2024.

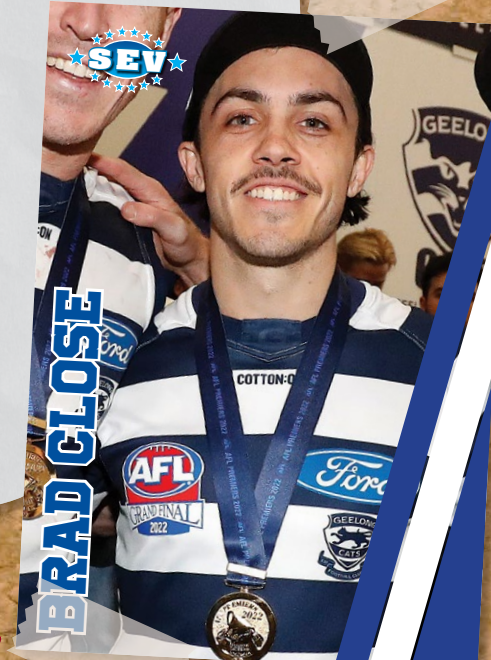
In 2023 Close remained a steady contributor similar to his elite 2022 season, only having a major improvement in goal accuracy.

While I do not blame him because of how great he played in 2022, Close played a crucial role in Geelong's premiership that year.

In the finals Close contributed five goals, with two of them coming in their grand final smashing of the Sydney Swans.

Close showed that he is a big game player from these finals games which should make him an important piece in Geelong's future with many of the senior guys slowly phasing out of the team.

As Geelong seeks to bounce back from its disappointing 2023 season Close will be looking to be playing back to his best this year.



BRAD CLOSE

Darcy Fogarty - Lucindale

Darcy Fogarty had an outstanding 2023 season with the Crows, a big factor in that was Fogarty's ability to play every week.

Last season Fogarty played a career high 21 games, a big improvement from the last two years only playing 17 games in both seasons.

Fogarty bagged 34 goals last season, only one better than the previous year but the forward impacted the game in other ways.

Fogarty had 16 goal assists last season, as well as 114 score involvements.

This comes from the weapons the Crows have in the forward line, such as Walker, Thilthorpe and Rankine.

Fogarty's ability to involve his teammates will play a big role for the Crows having a successful season as in 2023 the Crows led the league in goals per game, an area that Fogarty had a major role in.

An area Fogarty needs to work on coming into the 2024 season is shot accuracy.

His shot accuracy percentage took a massive hit last season compared to the season prior and improving this will make him one of the top forwards in the league.

Heading into 2024, Fogarty has set himself as a foundational piece of this team in the future as he will be a part of the new Crows leadership group in 2024.



MITCHELL HINGE

Toby Pink - Tantanoola

Toby Pink comes into 2024 with a second chance at his AFL dreams.

After being unable to make the senior team during his three years at the Sydney Swans, Pink was delisted back in 2019.

Pink then spent a few years at SANFL side Glenelg where he had a dominant 2023 season that shot him back to relevancy.

Pink was named at full back in the 2023 SANFL team of the year and helped Glenelg win a premiership.

Pink has been signed by North Melbourne as a delisted free agent and will look to replace the Roos' hole in their back line, left by Ben McKay's departure.

Tom McDonald - Edenhope

Tom McDonald has had the last two seasons riddled with injuries, only playing 10 games in 2022 due to Lisfranc injury.

In 2023 McDonald only played eight games due to having surgery on his ankle.

Besides the last two years McDonald played a big part in Melbourne's success in 2021.

He kicked 33 goals that season, helping Melbourne win the premiership by kicking two goals in the grand final.

Now heading into his 14th year McDonald will be looking to have a healthy season as he makes a return to a full season of footy in 2024.



TOM McDONALD