# BREAKFAST WITH BAILS

What a Dying Coach Taught Me About
Life, Learning & Leadership

PADDY STEINFORT

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*What a Dying Coach*
*Taught Me About*
*Life, Learning & Leadership*

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This book is dedicated
to Caron, the woman
who helped shape the man
who helped shape so many men

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# WARMUP

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*The game of life hands the average person many teachers over time. Most pass by in a flash, forgotten almost before they are out of sight.*

*Some guides give us strong direction for a short while, but their guidelines become blurred without immediate contact.*

*Then there are those rare mentors that exert only a subtle force on us at first contact, but whose impact defies the laws of physics and time. Instead of fading, it grows.*

*And when they are gone, when there's no contact at all, the effect multiplies. It's as if their presence was the last tackler to navigate before the message finally hit paydirt in our minds and our hearts.*

*Their lessons and approach to life stretch beyond the classroom, the sports field, or the office. These teachers have a rare ability to enter their subject's mind. But not through force, or tricks designed to sneak in the back way, but by just knocking at the side door and casually asking to come in and help.*

*And it's almost as if, by the sheer nature of their ability to get in there with minimal force, they have the right to stay forever.*

*We all remember our own versions of this sage guide: the high school teacher who was different from the rest; the tutor at university who just got how tough the material was to understand; the office mentor who took the time to guide you through the politics, even though she had bigger things to do.*

*I've been lucky enough to have a couple of these teachers in my adult life. This book is about one of them. He was a football coach, and his name was Dean Bailey, but everybody just called him Bails.*

*Some of the toughest training sessions that Bails ever ran were his last, and to say they were a little different would be an understatement. The training stretched over a period of about three months – sometimes two sessions a week, sometimes none, depending on what the coach's health would allow – and more often than not involved a degree of discomfort. Questions were asked of all who attended, coach included. But those involved still fronted up right to the end.*

*Although there was no video to review, or numbers to rake over, there was one goal the sessions were constantly working toward: the compilation of this book, a no-frills game plan for learning and leadership from a football coach who can teach us a lot about life.*

*What's that I hear you say? Isn't there more to life than just football?*

*There sure is.*

*But there's also more to football than just football.*

## THE SETTING

His death sentence came late in 2013.

Up until then, he was always active, this “old” coach. Whether he was dragging himself through the water, swimming laps once the players were gone, or riding to and from our training base at West Lakes, come sunshine, rain or level 3 hurricane. On more than one occasion, each of the other coaches made some quip about the old guy they almost knocked off the road, bent over the handlebars, powering away with knees out like a schoolboy.

But after returning from a great off-season trip between the 2013 and 2014 seasons, something started slowing him down.

It was a simple cough at first: a bit chesty, and presumably a result of the combined fun he had during the break. He had attended a High Performance sports conference in London with the team's head coach, Brenton Sanderson - Sando to those close to him - and then followed that up with an extended holiday in Europe, one he and his wife Caron had thoroughly enjoyed. After a harrowing few of years involving power battles, a sacking, a league investigation and subsequent suspension for Dean, it was a welcome relief for the couple. Caron had been through almost as much as Dean, and they immersed themselves in the getaway.

The cough seemed a pretty open and shut case that didn't take a genius to work out: $x$ number of weeks over $y$ number of cities with an infinite number of red wines = lowered immune system. Add the constant air conditioning on the flights, and it was obvious this was just a cold that would be kicked as soon as we were back at base and into the healthy routine again.

And with the plans he and Sando had hatched for pushing the boundaries of the training environment this pre-season, Bails

would be more active than ever. The time the two coaches spent together at the conference was invaluable, allowing them to formulate a plot that would take the team back to the top end of the table, where they both thought the talent level belonged.

They had talked strategy and handling of certain players, then designed new drills and rituals that would increase pressure on players and prepare them mentally for when games were on the line. Most of these strategies were based on competition with consequences, but the two competitive beasts were particularly pleased with the idea of a Players vs. Coaches challenge, where the coaching group would compete with selected players, with a penalty riding on the outcome.

The enthusiasm was obvious in emails to the other coaches still on holidays, and as soon as the pesky little cough was gone, Bails would be all in.

But this pesky little cough wasn't that easy to shake.

Cough syrup didn't do it at first, so he took more. He carried a bottle with him to work after the first week back, mostly because it seemed to keep it at bay long enough to allow him to talk about what he loved - football - without a cough interrupting his flow. When he was in the zone, Bails could talk for hours about the game or a certain player's strengths or weaknesses.

Like a player coming up through the ranks, the cough was graduating levels as the weeks progressed. It was moving up from “pesky” to “annoying” now.

The bike riding was the first thing to go, simply because the crisp morning air left him even more cough-ridden for the rest of the day. There weren't many players around just yet, so he hoped that taking it easy for a week would allow him to get on top of it, primed for when full training resumed.

But it didn't.

A week or so after the players were back in full training, the new tradition of Coaches vs. Players challenge was a hit, and

both groups had been equally cocky and nervous heading into a goal kicking challenge. Players A, B, C and D were matched against coaches W, X, Y and Z, and on the line was a “Malcolm”: a relatively innocent 20m shuttle run that would be a cinch for any suburban athlete, but for the fact that every ten metres you were forced to drop to touch your chest on the ground and push back up to keep running. If the selected competitors lost, the whole group was doomed to feel the burn.

As the final kick for the coaches sailed wide, the players celebrated with enthusiasm and bravado, trash talking the dejected coaching group before they had even lined up for the first minute. As a penalized member myself, this was my first Malcolm, and pretty soon I was aware of nothing more than my thumping heart rate, shrunken airways and burning chest.

Even the ache in my legs faded into the background as I willed my way to the end; it would be a cardinal sin, a failure as a man for a coach to not get through this. You couldn't stop, unless you were comfortable with the ribbing you would get for the next twelve months.

By the time the torture was over, I could barely think beyond the burn in my throat, the thumping in my chest, and the voice in my head: a mix of curse words and questions. How the hell had I gotten so out of shape?

I knew the answer: like many coaches and managers in pro sports, I had spent my “holiday” buried in the search for The Secret: the magic pill that would separate us from the pack. We were chasing the ultimate goal, sporting immortality, and it was our job to build plans that would make those dreams come true.

It wasn't until we came off the track, still breathless, that someone told me about Bails.

He had stopped midway, claiming he couldn't actually breathe, and headed into his office. There he sat, gasping for air and not having much success.

He saw the club doctor, who pressed a stethoscope around various points on his chest and in quick order suggested he get to a hospital to see a specialist. Within hours, an x-ray had revealed fluid on his left lung, and he was diagnosed with pneumonia.

Not one to feel sorry for himself or to take things too seriously, he shot a quick note from his hospital bed to Sando, who relayed the message to us:

*Guys,*

*Bails spent last night in Flinders & had 1.5 litres of fluid drained from his lungs.*

*In his words, a 'combo of Peroni, gelato & Italian red wine'....so at least they didn't drain any of his sense of humour out.*

*No set time for a return date, just plenty of rest, but he will be home from the hospital this afternoon.*
*In the meantime, Steinfort & Nutta will pick up his work from a coaching point of view, but we all might need to chip in to cover his guys.*

*I don't think the whole world needs to know, so we'll keep it in the house for the time being.*

*Thanks*
*Sando*

Typical manly communication from the patient, and from within the football department. The message was clear: we would power on, some of us would step up to cover him and we would be even stronger when he came back.

But despite the excess drainage, the condition was no better a day or two later, and Bails remained in the hospital.

When further tests were ordered, brows became furrowed and conversations about how Bails was doing became shorter

and more awkward. Those who had asked more than once understood it wasn't progressing as it should.

## THE OPPONENT

Finally, on a hot, dry day in December, Dean and Caron were handed the news: Bails had an aggressive cancer in his lungs. They didn't know what type of cancer, as the source hadn't yet been identified.

Which meant they couldn't give a definite answer on whether it could be beaten or not.

"How did I get it?" Dean asked.

Nobody could answer him. Those who believed in the links between stress and cancer bit their tongue – now was not the time for finger-pointing. A fight was on the cards first, and more info was needed.

"Is it spreading?"

"We can't be sure right now," came the clinical reply. "Further tests are required."

"Am I going to die?"

"Until we know more," the doctor replied in a practiced, measured voice, "we can't give you any specific answers. But we can say this condition is life limiting."

More words followed, but to both Bails and Caron, they were simply white noise, like the ambient murmur of a crowd behind the voice of a commentator. What they heard crystal clear was the most delicately worded sledgehammer:

*This condition is life limiting.*

So while the disease Bails now knew was cancer continued to grow inside him, the former working-class footballer was consigned to a relatively ambiguous treatment regime until further details came to light. For a man known for his clinical

dissection of every detail in both his and the opposition's game plan, this vague opponent unnerved him, though he wouldn't let that on to many. It would be a challenge he would tackle in the same way he did his backyard games as a kid: not knowing where it might end up, just trying to get better, one challenge at a time.

When word reached the coaches, the reaction was stunned silence. Then the inevitable questions came, mirroring those that Bails and Caron had asked their doctor and which would be repeated by the players when they were told: how bad is it? When did it start? Is it terminal? How long will he be off? Can we visit him?

Then, in more hushed tones or away from the main group, the more personal questions came, reflections of those with families putting themselves in his shoes: how is Caron? And the boys? Do they think their dad is going to die? What will they do if he does?

Vague answers gave rise to a sense of hope that this would be a similar story to that of our Head of Physical Performance Team, Nick Poulos, who had fought cancer and won almost a decade ago now. Or, at worst, that it would be a courageous battle similar to that of the legendary Jim Stynes, stretching over multiple years and allowing us to prepare for the loss of a close friend.

But it belied the serious, vicious nature of Bails' affliction, which was attacking his lung with all the aggression of a tackle from the best defender in the league.

A defender that was on top, and not likely to ease up.

## THE COACH

Before I worked with him, my perception of the coach Dean Bailey was probably similar to that of anyone else who hadn't yet met him in person, based purely on snippets fed to the public via cutaways to the coaches' box during games, in post-match press conferences, or in the all too rare article that actually provided more than a glib quote or media friendly cliché.

In these short glimpses, tainted often by the stress of another Demons loss, or the growing pressure around his job security later in his senior coaching experience, he seemed like part exasperated teacher, part unflustered poker player.

Rarely over the top in his reactions, his calm, methodical approach - despite constant setbacks - suggested he was either trying to bluff his way through to the next hand without losing what little support he had left in his stack, or that he knew something the public didn't. Something about the students he had, the game they were learning, or how good their teacher was.

In late 2011, I learned that it was a little bit of all of the above.

On a typically still October evening in Adelaide - a little chillier than normal for the South Australian capital given it was the day before November began, I had stepped off the last Virgin flight for the night, not quite sure what to expect as I arrived in a new town.

I'd received instructions by email while I was in the U.S. from Maria Ballestrin, the football secretary (i.e., the person who makes things happen) at the Adelaide Crows, where I was about to start the very next day:

*Hi Paddy,*

*Just to keep in touch, I hope you are having a great time.*

*When you arrive on Sunday 30 October, Dean Bailey will be picking you up.*

*Dean has found and is renting a three-bedroom place in Brighton. His family won't be moving immediately, and he has volunteered to have you stay with him until you find your own place.*

*I know you are on holiday, but I am sure you don't mind me touching base.*

*Regards,*
*Maria.*

Grabbing my phone from my pocket, I shot a text to the other new coach I'd be staying with while I found my feet in Adelaide. The reply came back swiftly.

'Round the corner. See you out front in 5.

No fuss, no extra details – simple, direct.

By the time I was at the back of the car, bag in hand, Bails was already there with one hand reaching for the bag, extending the other to welcome me.

He was a shortish guy, unassuming almost, except when he walked – chest out, feet slightly splayed, arms anchored steadily by his side even when walking quickly. The combined effect of these three idiosyncrasies was the impression of a regular guy, calm and contained, but still ready for anything the game of life might want to throw at him.

Contradicting this puffed-out, chest-first entry to the room was a handshake that was almost ambivalent – relaxed grip, no attempt to display more emotion than was necessary, average

contact time. Not overdoing it to create false engagement, but not underselling the person either. Pretty much in the middle.

"How was the flight?" Bails asked after the standard exchange of “Gday mate, great to meet you.”

"Yeah, not bad,” was my reply, almost as standard as the greeting. “Got the double of exit row and seat next to me was empty. Poor man's business class!"

Bails chuckled, and we were off to a good start.

The rest of the ride back to Bails' place was more like a cruise than an airport transfer. Or perhaps more like a chilled out wine and coffee tour.

"Just bear with me here," Bails mumbled through the parking ticket held between his teeth as he fumbled for his wallet in the console.

"No dramas."

A short pause while he negotiated the exit at the airport.

"So do you like coffee?" Bails started up again as the car left the airport.

"I can't live without it," I told him, only half-joking.

"Good. I think we'll get along then. How do you have it?"

"Short. Black. Get the caffeine straight to the veins." I had slapped the inside of my elbow, a visual gag that Bails appreciated with a singular “Ha!” and a wry smile.

"I'll tell you how I have mine tomorrow when you're going to get them," he quipped. "There's this great place around the corner from our place that we will become very familiar with, I think."

He had said “our place.” Was the rest of the Bailey clan waiting back there for me? My thoughts would've normally run away with me, but the casual energy of Bails and his conversational skills dragged me from my mind and back to the present.

This ability to command attention without craving it was something I'd become familiar with over the next few weeks as

we shared breakfasts, drives, dinners, and plenty of coffees in between. But here in this first face-to-face encounter was a glimpse into the coach who wasn't shown on the TV, or in the carefully scripted press conferences.

Our first encounter the night before and at breakfast that first morning was a perfect case in point: with nothing to go on but a shared drive home and some banter over breakfast, I would still have been able to pick the adjectives those closest to him would eventually use to eulogized the man they knew better than any: humble, humourous, headstrong, and human.

In the glow of what was possible for our new team, we both had no idea what lay ahead. Sometimes you don’t know the value of a certain time until it’s gone.

In those whirlwind days at a new team, I lived with him for a few weeks, sharing breakfast, coffee breaks, and dinners. We talked sport, politics, single life, married life, the life of a footballer, the life of a bachelor, favourite foods, favourite TV shows, favourite books. I enjoyed tales from his six years in the game as a player at a powerhouse Essendon team, but even more entertaining were his coaching stories. I heard how he was hired by the legendary Kevin Sheedy as an untried development coach at his old team. I learned of his premiership experiences at Port Adelaide. And I discovered the dark side of the game as he recounted his struggles, and eventual sacking, as head coach at Melbourne.

We got to know each other in the way football staff often did – intimately, intensely, but at the same time with professional boundaries that kept us from going too deeply into each others' business.

And then I moved out.

Partly because I wanted to be my own man; mostly because I didn't want to get too close. I was keen to build my own life, live like a single bachelor, and were it not for us sharing the same

workplace and forty-five players to develop, I would probably have lost touch.

This hit and run approach to new friendships was a habit of mine that started when my playing career ended. I had begun my career as a professional footballer at the age of 18, coming straight out of high school with stars in my eyes and dreams in my head. I was a first-round draft pick, destined for big things. In those years, I was a total team player, a huge giver.

I'd left the game five years later with a regrettable record to my name: the player who spent the longest time with a single team without ever playing a game. Injuries were not kind to me, and on the rare occasion I was fit, other players who I had happily helped as a good teammate had gone past me.

When I was cut, that word was as apt as any to describe the feeling I had at having so many "friendships" severed all at once: cut to the bone. As I struggled on my own with those emotions, I concluded that the world would turn on you despite your best efforts, regardless of how loyal or social you might be.

I'd learned what I thought were the most important lessons of my adult life: Look after yourself, and take whatever chances you can to get ahead. From that point on my purpose in life was to stand out. With this relentless chase for the next edge, the next promotion, the next upgrade, I was unwittingly becoming a rare commodity in the industry I loved but had run away from – a former player, with scientific qualifications, experience in international sports, and as close to 10,000 hours of leadership training as one could find in a 30-year-old.

This played out for a decade in my personal life too – relationships came and went, as did jobs. Always looking out for myself first. Always striving to step up to the next level. That's how I came to find myself working in Adelaide with Bails. And that's how I came to move out of his house after only a month or so. I had to stand on my own and handle my own business.

That's what winners do, right?

## THE PLAN

I had my business face on when I entered the hospital room for the first time on my own. But Bails had no inkling of formality or awkwardness about him, even though I had already set the scene for a more in-depth conversation with a semi-formal text message.

Bails, u up for a visitor Sat or Sunday morning?
Got an idea I wanna' run past you...

The reply was typically short and sharp.

Either sat or sun doesn't matter

And in keeping with the business-like setup, I replied in double time to lock the appointment.

What I hadn't expected was to see his sons when I walked in. It was so normal, yet unnerving: Bails was kicking back in bed, looking as healthy as he had at his desk only days earlier. His two sons, Mitchell and Darcy, sat at the foot of his bed in standard hospital visitors chairs.

Darcy, the younger of the two at 19, was in great shape thanks to being midway through a pre-season with the Glenelg Tigers himself. With a fresh haircut, his strawberry-blonde hair cropped short and swept to the side, he looked like a well-trained soldier.

Mitch's red hair was much more stark, thanks in part to it blending into a growing beard of the same colour. At 22 he was already a stocky young man with a barrel chest, almost an extreme caricature of what I imagine Bails would've been at that

age. I first met Mitch when I lived with Bails, and his dry humour was as evident in person as Darcy's was through the text banter he would engage in with his dad on a nightly basis.

This scene was anything but humourous though. It had slapped me in the face as I entered his room. In any other context seeing a father and his two sons, who were now young men, sitting and chewing the fat would be heartwarming. But knowing the reason each of the actors was in this scene added an edge that was too sharp to swallow. Sitting with his sons would only make the emotions of the current struggle more intense. I could only imagine that at this point, Bails just wanted some normality from his friends. Talk about footy, training, the weather. Hell, talk about anything other than what he was feeling. To ask questions about his emotions and what is important in life was to press on bones that were freshly broken, and would only confirm the break rather than do anything to fix it.

The dry Bailey humor was a dominant gene though, and all three of them possessed it in spades. They kept the conversation light for as long as the standard "summer-weather-football" banter lasted. After five minutes or so, putting his great sense for the feel of a room to use, Bails picked up that my idea may not have been the best for the boys. With the deft touch of a world-class communicator, he mentioned something about the boys going to get something to eat. Both left with a dry joke – like father, like son – and headed out into the corridor.

As I settled into the leather chair next to his bed, and the small talk about sport, training, and the weather was done, my business face wasn't so strong anymore. But my ear for a lull in conversation was still sharp, and when the opportunity came up, I took a deep breath and jumped in.

"Can I ask you something?"

"You just did," Bails replied, dry as ever.

I couldn't help but chuckle at the fact that he'd still make bad jokes a week into his first hospitalization.

"You got me." I paused, still unsure if this was a good idea. "Have you ever read the book *Tuesday's With Morrie*?" I threw it up in the air like an alley-oop, with a mix of hesitation and guilt, spiked with a shot of hope.

"Yeah, I have, yeah – great book." He stopped fiddling with the bed controls and looked up at me with an eyebrow cocked. "Why's that?"

All of a sudden, the words I had practiced in the car were gone, vanished like the training of an expert golfer who has a case of the yips. I had described the idea to plenty of people, and everyone loved it. Even more importantly, everyone I had canvassed was pretty sure Bails would be okay with it too.

But I didn't want him to feel like he was being used, especially at a time like this. He had more than his fair share of guys in white coats prodding and probing him, talking about him as if he weren't in the room and asking him questions that he had to answer honestly, but couldn't know what his answers might be adding up to.

The last thing he needed right now was another person treating him like a science experiment, assessing what he said and collating responses and probing deeper and ignoring his emotions, his humanity. I had little knowledge of cancer, but a fairly intimate knowledge of the powerlessness that comes with the hospital gown. Eight operations in as many years during a career wrecked by injuries allowed me that insight at least.

I almost pulled out, playing with the idea of making up an excuse for bringing it up. But then a memory of our last breakfast reminded me why I couldn't.

---

Swedish Tarts café in Henley Beach is a chic little hole in the wall that barely had room for us when we showed up on a sunny spring day, so we took the only table that was available. Sitting down among the cool kids and assorted soccer mums, I thought the conversation we had planned to have - about how we wanted to raise the bar for the team this pre-season and which players we needed to target most - would be stilted a little, especially given we were clad head to toe in Crows training apparel.

"Sometimes you get to set a course when the waters are calm." He sipped his tea and coughed loudly, drawing the ire of a young couple on a coffee date at the table next to us. "When you are first in charge, or in a new position, the waters are calm. Hell, most of the time in those cases the waters are even flowing in the direction you want, and it's smooth sailing – the winds are gentle, the bloody dolphins are even swimming next to you, the sun is shining... anyone can set the course in those conditions."

The sensitive approach might have been the way to go had the coffee been with another coach. But Bails wasn't one for beating around the bush.

"I had to deal with a lot of wankers back at Melbourne," he said loudly enough to startle at least one eavesdropper. "Know-it-alls who questioned something that they initially supported, just 'cos other people started asking questions. The plan hadn't changed. The expectations hadn't changed. Only thing that changed was people's opinions."

"Problem is, the waters never stay calm – there'll be things that come up that will make people question the plans and the program you set, and it'll make you even question it yourself. And you should do that occasionally, but the better coaches and leaders are able to stick to it – to press into the rough weather and say ‘screw it – I set that plan with this end in mind, and I know it's right.'"

"When you've put something in motion that you believe in, you've gotta see it through."

---

And so, like Bails taught me to, I pressed on.

I told him about the idea to catch up with him regularly to talk in depth about life. I stumbled over the fact that I didn't want it to be about death. I clumsily mentioned that I wanted to focus on football, mostly the good stuff, but occasionally we might touch on some bad times too. I threw in that I wanted to use some of it with the players while he was away from the team. Then I quickly moved on to the fact that I would be flexible and work around him, mostly so we didn't hover too long on the fact he might not be back for a while.

All the while, I avoided eye contact, almost ashamed that I was asking a guy who was fighting the biggest battle of his life if he could do a favour for myself and the guys he was teaching. I tried to lighten the mood with a little joke at the end about Wikileaks. I don't know if it worked, but he spoke up, maybe to put me out of my misery.

"Yeah," he said off-hand, with a slight wheeze. "Yeah, that's fine. Not sure if anything that comes out could be considered wisdom, but that should be okay."

I closed my eyes and did a mental fist-pump, thrilled that I was ballsy enough to actually ask the question in the first place.

"But they'll have to be short, ‘cos the treatment is taking it out of me at the moment," he added. “I’m already losing my hair.” Bails had been bald for years. Good to see his sense of humor was still intact.

I laughed. "Of course mate,” I agreed, “I was only thinking twenty or thirty minutes at a time.” We then went over the basic details: how I would send him some questions in advance, so he wouldn’t get caught on the hop; how I would use the Dictaphone

on my phone to record the chats; which times would suit; how I would bring some brain food and coffee to make sure we were both sharp; and, what we would refer to the project as: *Breakfast with Bails*.

"Sounds good," I concluded. A full stop on a full-on request.

A stillness filled the room, perhaps accentuated for me by the lowering of my anxious heart rate and the quiet of the TV between points in the Australian Open tennis.

"You want some more chocolate?" I asked.

"Does Dolly Parton sleep on her back?"

Back to normal for now. Sports. Sugar. Sarcasm. The complicated stuff can wait until the next visit.