

'FARMER' A MAN OF THE LAND

A flag and then back to the farm for Blues star.

West Australian Ross Ditchburn's nickname was 'Farmer' during a whirlwind 28-game VFL career with Carlton in 1982-83.

And the reason is simple: His family has been involved with the sheep industry for more than 100 years on its 4000ha property at Kukerin, 308km south-east of Perth.

They run about 2600 breeding Merinos on the property and, while Ditchburn says he can shear a sheep if he has to, football took priority and he never really mastered the art.

But with a property the size of the Golden Hill Merino Stud in his care, Ditchburn is well qualified to talk about the benefits of woollen football jumpers and was happy to have his name associated with the Fibre of Football campaign, which celebrates the great heritage between wool and football; two uniquely Australian products.

Ditchburn's VFL career, which included the Blues' 1982 premiership, was instigated by his Claremont teammate and former Blues champion Ken Hunter, who put his name forward when Carlton was keen to recruit a top forward.

Coach David Parkin and then football manager Shane O'Sullivan were quickly on a plane to Perth and quickly had their man.

But Ditchburn's career almost stalled before it started. Tried at centre half-forward, he says he didn't have the upper body to play that role.

He made his VFL debut in round eight, 1982, against Footscray at the Whitten Oval, but by round 14 had only the one game to his name.

In a heart-to-heart talk with Parkin, Ditchburn suggested he might be better suited to the full-forward position and, as they say, the rest is history.



FOOTY AND FARMING: Ross Ditchburn, with wife Jodie and one of their Merinos on their WA property, and (inset) in his days as a Blue.



Ditchburn kicked six goals against Melbourne in round 15 and 12 against St Kilda in only his third VFL match in round 16.

He finished as the club's leading goalkicker for the season with 61 (and 45 in the reserves) and was also a member of the Blues' premiership side.

But as euphoric as that must have been in his first season, Ditchburn's recollection of the Grand Final is hazy because he was accidentally knocked out at the 20-minute mark of the first quarter.

"A teammate hit me on the chest with a pass, but the ball spilled out and I dived forward to complete the mark," Ditchburn recalled.

"But (Richmond's) Alan Martello was behind me and his boot collected my head on the way through as he fell over the top of me.

"I blame myself for dropping the mark, but that was the end of my day.

"I spent the rest of the first half in the doctor's rooms and remember

“**Ditchburn kicked 12 against St Kilda in only his third VFL match**”

getting my medal and doing a lap of honour.

"But then I collapsed and was in hospital until 1am and by then the celebrations were over."

Ditchburn did not have as successful a season in 1983 (one of Victoria's wettest on record) and when his father Bill was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease, he had no hesitation in returning to the family property in Kukerin. **■**



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