



MCC LIBRARY FACT SHEET

VALE NEALE DANIHER 1961 - 2026

VALE NEALE FRANCIS DANIHER AO 1961-2026

On May 25 Australia was saddened to learn of the death of Neale Daniher after a long fight against Motor Neurone Disease (MND). Neale Daniher served Australian football for 34 years and over 600 games. He was an outstanding player, shrewd football analyst, successful coach and mentor and respected club administrator.

However, his legacy is greater than any football achievement.

Neale Daniher was developing into one of the best players of his time when a series of injuries blighted his playing career. He subsequently had one of the longest interrupted playing careers in VFL/AFL history, playing 82 games over a 12-season period. Following this, Neale's passion for, and understanding of, the Australian game saw him develop into a universally respected coach and football manager at four League clubs, spanning almost 30 years.

Daniher was a superb half-back flanker who made his senior debut aged only 18 and 44 days. He had speed, marvellous skills, could read the game like a veteran and possessed an unflappable temperament. Daniher didn't miss a game in his first two seasons, becoming one of the best and most consistent players in the VFL. In three short years, Neale Daniher won Essendon's best first year player award and the VFL recruit of the year (both 1979), represented Victoria in both 1980 and 1981, and won Essendon's best and fairest in 1981. He also played in the Club's night premiership in 1981. Daniher looked to have a long and brilliant future ahead of him.

After 68 consecutive games, Daniher sustained a knee injury that was to begin a long period of injury interrupting his playing career. Despite this injury, coach Kevin Sheedy appointed Daniher the club's captain, and at age 21 he became the youngest captain in Essendon's history. Sadly, he also became the only Essendon captain never to lead his team onto the field. While recovering from injury in 1987, Daniher was appointed assistant coach at Essendon and went on to become a pioneer of video analysis. He is credited with identifying a key Carlton tactic at centre bounces, which led to Essendon nullifying the Blues in the 1993 Grand Final, thereby ensuring Essendon's premiership win.

Daniher left Essendon to become assistant coach at newly formed AFL club Fremantle from 1995 to 1997, before being appointed senior coach at Melbourne from 1998 to 2007. At Melbourne, Daniher's coaching had immediate results. The club went from the wooden spoon the year before he arrived, to a preliminary final in 1998, finishing fourth in his first year. The club then played finals in six of the nine completed seasons during which Daniher was coach before his departure during 2007, and he led the club to the 2000 Grand Final, coincidentally against Essendon. Daniher was then appointed General Manager of Football Operations at the West Coast Eagles, holding this position between 2008 and 2013. He stood down after being diagnosed with Motor Neurone Disease (MND).

His life was thereafter dedicated to "FightMND", taking on the disease he knew as "The Beast" by fundraising for research into a cure, and increasing awareness throughout the community. The highlight of this each year since 2014 has been the 'Big Freeze' at the MCG, incorporating the ice slide, the March to the 'G, and the much loved beanie that acts as an insignia of each year. Another huge feature of the FightMND campaign has been Daniher's Drive, travelling to rural areas as part of the ongoing effort to both fundraise and raise community awareness, while forging connections and goodwill throughout the country.

Throughout the decade and a half from his original diagnosis, Neale Daniher was formally honoured on a number of occasions. He was named Melburnian of the Year in 2016, recognising his "spirit and generosity amidst adversity." Daniher was then named Victorian of the Year in 2019, and was ultimately named Australian of the Year in 2025. Where Australian honours are concerned, Daniher was first acknowledged in the 2016 Queen's Birthday honours list, being named as a Member of the Order of Australia (AM), with the citation reading: *For significant service to community health through support for people with Motor Neurone Disease and their families, and to Australian rules football.* In 2021, Neale Daniher was raised to Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) in the Queen's Birthday honours list, with the citation reading: *For distinguished service to people with Motor Neurone Disease and their families through advocacy, public education and fundraising initiatives.*

A State Funeral for Neale Daniher will be held at the MCG on Wednesday June 10 at 1:00pm.

NEALE DANIHER AND THE QUEEN'S/KING'S BIRTHDAY

One of the greatest occasions of any AFL season is the Queen's/King's Birthday match. All the ingredients come together – a wonderful contest, the walk to the MCG with red and blue flags – and blue beanies. The energy of the day is largely thanks to the man who will always be at the heart of it all: Neale Daniher. Here is some of the story.

With his coaching tenure at Melbourne running for 211 games between Round One, 1998, and Round 13, 2007, Neale Daniher has been a constant part of the Queen's/King's Birthday since the late 1990s. His presence, and the varied achievements on the day, have added to the story of the long and celebrated rivalry between Melbourne and Collingwood. In 1999, Melbourne played Collingwood in a game on the Queen's Birthday; this was not officially counted as a "Queen's Birthday game" Melbourne won by eleven points.

The next season, the fixture was mixed up due to planning for the Sydney Olympics – while Melbourne and Collingwood didn't meet on the Queen's Birthday, on the Saturday closest to this occasion, Melbourne defeated Collingwood by 65 points. The Queen's Birthday game between Melbourne and Collingwood became a settled fixture as of 2001, meaning that Neale Daniher officially coached seven of these games during his tenure as senior coach. The first three were losses to the Magpies – by 77, 51, and 56 points respectively – and the remaining four were victories. In 2004, it was a narrow win, by nine points. In 2005, the margin improved, with victory by 45 points. In 2006, things improved even further, with Melbourne achieving victory by 47 points. In 2007, it was back to a closer game, with victory by 13 points. This was Neale Daniher's third last game as Melbourne's senior coach, and a fitting result for a treasured contest.

The return of the Daniher name to the Queen's Birthday game took place from 2015, with the institution of the "Big Freeze at the 'G", raising funds to research MND. As part of the occasion, the Neale Daniher Trophy is presented to the best on ground. . . In 2020, the game could not take place due to coronavirus lockdowns. However, the AFL community continued to take part in the 'Big Freeze', with ice challenges deployed far from the MCG by players from all teams. In 2021, the game again suffered dislocation courtesy of coronavirus lockdowns, but the commitment of many saw the ice slide continue at the MCG, while the game between Melbourne and Collingwood took place at the SCG. While it was a win for Nathan Buckley's last game as Collingwood coach, the MCG ice slide action was a win for everyone, particularly FightMND. As part of the Queen's Birthday Honours in 2021, Neale Daniher was elevated to AO (Officer of the Order of Australia), following his naming as a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 2016, recognising his service and commitment to the FightMND cause since 2014

A QUOTE FROM NEALE DANIHER

Below is an extract from Neale Daniher's address to Melbourne players ahead of their 2019 Queen's Birthday match against Collingwood for Big Freeze 5, at the MCG.

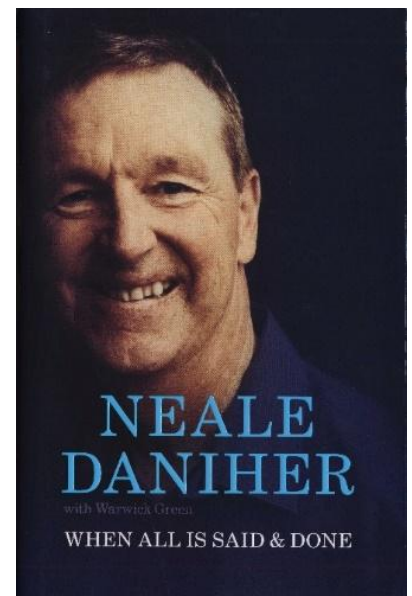
Life is difficult. Life is tough. And I wish for [my grandson] Cooper, like I wish for you people, and you'll wish for people you love, you can conduct yourself in the right manner when things get tough. Because in life, it's not IF it'll be tough, it just when, and how often. And when that happens for him, I don't want him to fold. I don't want him to be another life victim.

So, what is the right way? What is the right way to conduct yourself in difficult times? The right way is to somehow summon the courage, the moral courage to take responsibility. And sometimes you'll say, "well, it wasn't my fault, I was the victim, it's not my responsibility, it's someone else's". Nup!

No matter what happens, it's up to you to do something about it. Have the courage to accept responsibility, don't shy away from it, don't baulk, don't procrastinate, don't handball it to someone else. And by doing that, what will emerge inside you, is the better side of your character. That will allow you to prevail. That will allow you to move through it. And it might even allow you to transcend, and that's what I hope Cooper learns. Taking responsibility means looking for the opportunity. When life gets difficult, you think it's a train wreck, there's no opportunity, there's always opportunity. I was diagnosed with a disease that will kill me. No treatment, no cure. No hope, some say.

Where's the opportunity? I tell ya.

If you're in the blame game, if you're in woe is for me, poor bugger me. You'll never find it. You're looking to blame someone. There's always opportunity, and my opportunity was to fight MND. And that's allowed me to prevail. It's allowed me to find purpose, to transcend, what's happening to me. I wish Cooper learns what the right way is. I can't protect him. He's gotta take on that responsibility himself. Your attitude in any circumstance, to choose your way, that's something not only to wish for, but to aspire to.



Neale Daniher's 2019 autobiography, *When All Is Said & Done*.

This Fact Sheet was written and compiled by Lynda Carroll.

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