

"I'VE NEVER DROPPED THE SOAP!"

Collingwood midfielder Paul Licuria is one of AFL's shinning stars and a dead-set hottie. But there's more to him than kicking goals and looking good in shorts. He spoke to Matthew Myers about the game, art and his gay mates.

DNA: What is the best thing about being in an AFL team?

Paul Licuria: The best thing, and I guess it would be the same in every sport, is the good friendships that I've made. Not only with my teammates but with some really good people outside of the game, too.

What's the worst part?

Injuries. I've had eight operations all up, including my knees and one on my face. Last month a mate of mine ended up in hospital [teammate Blake Caracella] with a serious neck injury. So, the worst part about football is the injuries that happen along the way.

Do you know about the Collingwood gay supporter group The Pink Magpies?

I've never been to any of their functions as yet but I've met some of them. In fact, I met a member when I was in Thailand last year. He came up to say hello and told me that he was a Pink Magpie. I was wrapped!

You feature in a stunning painting by renowned gay artist Ross Watson.

Yes, I do! That's what I meant earlier about football allowing you to meet a lot of people, and I was lucky enough to meet Ross through the painting. We've actually become good mates and now he's off to London for his art show. He's a legend.

So what do you think of the painting?

The first time I saw it, I couldn't believe it. It blew me away. It's an amazing painting. Everyone that's seen it absolutely loves it and I've been lucky enough to go to some of Ross' exhibitions. I've got a pretty good friendship with him now. I am extremely honoured that he chose to paint myself and Brodie [Holland].

Do you have any other gay mates?

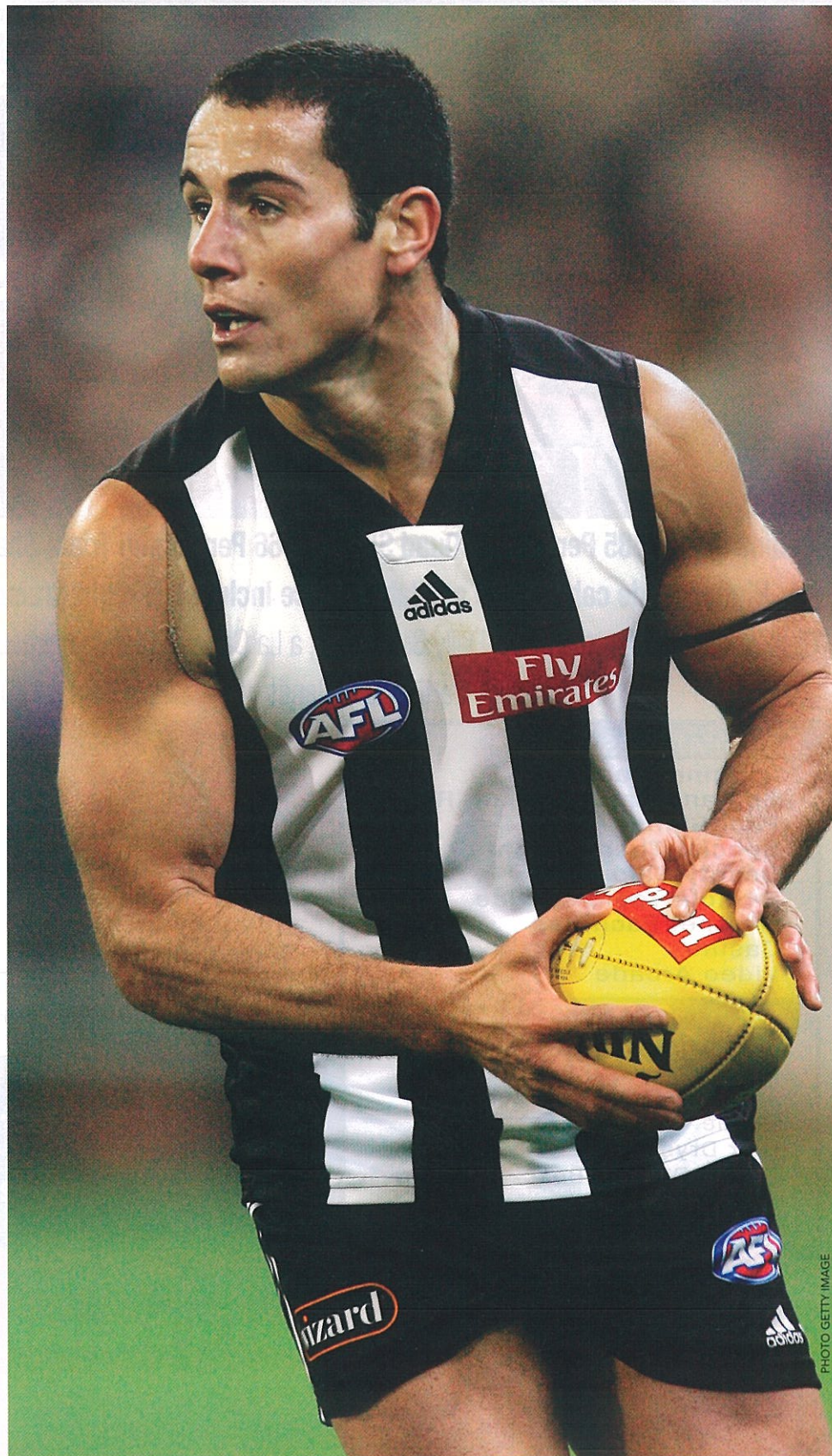
I never did until I met Ross. I've met gay guys around the traps in nightclubs. I lived in Sydney for three years, so I'd met them out and about but I never really had any close gay mates, until Ross.

What's the campest CD in your collection?

Kylie, which I was given for my birthday, and Madonna's *Confessions On A Dance Floor* – mainly because my girlfriend likes Madonna.

Have you ever been to a gay nightclub?

Yes, I have. Actually, when I was 16 I went to



The Peel in Collingwood to a birthday party that was being held there. That was my first experience of being in a gay club and it never bothered me. I lived in Sydney for three years and I used to go to a couple of the bars on Oxford Street.

Guys have come out in other sports, but it's yet to happen in AFL.

Well, I think it's a tough gig, but I also think it's changed a hell of a lot, too. I honestly think that if someone wanted to come out now it wouldn't be a problem. I don't think players would fuss about it. If I knew that one of my teammates was gay, it wouldn't worry me at all. I'm there to play footy and we're there to win. Initially, I think it would be a big shock because no one's ever come out but it wouldn't bother me at all.

Without naming names, do you know of any gay players?

I guess there are always rumours going around but I never pay attention to them. In fact, I went into a café last Friday where a guy was trying to tell me that I was gay! I was laughing about it. He was half-joking, but probably meant it. It didn't bother me. I'm in a great relationship with my girlfriend. **He probably mistook you for gay because of your cool dress sense.**

Yeah, most gay guys dress pretty funky.

You have a very

European dress sense.

My father's Italian and my mother's Spanish. My mum's a dressmaker and she always dressed us up well as kids.

Your modelling has been included in GQ and the Men For All Seasons calendars.

What about that woodsman shoot, where you had nothing but a scarf and an axe?

When I think about it now, I wonder how the hell I had the courage to do that! It was the first real publicity shoot that I did and it keeps popping up. Someone will come up and say, "Can you sign this?"

We also got to see your butt!

Yeah, but I've always been casual about that sort of stuff. It's the way I've been brought up. We were brought up in a fun environment with a lot of parties and dancing – we're very close.

Have you seen Brokeback Mountain?

Yes, and I enjoyed it. To be honest, I didn't expect to see what I did. It's a great movie and I guess there would be many stories in real life like that, where people can't speak out because of the circumstances.

Does it ever feel odd to know that women and gay men may be checking you out, instead of the football?

Well, I play football, but then I also do those photo shoots, so I guess that's going to be

the case. I think they would probably love all the footballers, especially when we used to wear the tight shorts. They're a little looser now, so they don't get to see as much.

Ahh, the old AFL tight shorts. You play in the era of the looser fit.

Yeah, I do. But when I was younger I was a lot chubbier and always went for the baggier shorts to hide a bit of fat – I've never gone for the tighter shorts to be honest.

We prefer the tighter shorts, you know?

Yep, the Warrick Capper shorts. There's been a few players who've still worn them, too. Fraser Gehrig from St Kilda always used to wear tight shorts – always!

Now, tell us the truth... have you ever dropped the soap in the shower?

I don't think I have, but if someone drops the soap there's always a joke about it, but it's all in good fun. When you play footy in a footy club there's always that sort of shit going on and the boys muck around.

You're a fully qualified electrician. When was the last time you wore the overalls?

I don't get much opportunity now, but in the off-season I do a little bit. Now I get a lot of work through the footy club and I try to go out and do quotes and that sort of stuff. So it keeps me busy – I am also getting my flying licence.

"If I knew that one of my teammates was gay, it wouldn't worry me at all."

Flying?

I love flying. It's good fun and it's something I can do to keep my mind off everything. I can do to keep my mind off everything. I have a pretty busy lifestyle and when I go up to fly it's the only time I can get my mind away from everything else, like footy. I'm so focused on what I'm doing up there.

Where would you eventually like to go with that?

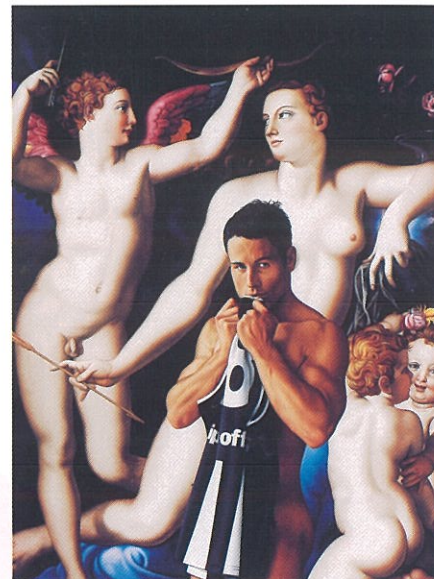
I'd love to fly commercially one day. It's very hard because you need to get your hours up and playing footy obviously makes that difficult. We get one day off a week and in that one day I try to fly, but if the weather's bad it gets cancelled. So it's a slow process for me at the moment.

And you have a black belt in karate?

When I was younger my dad sent me and my sister to karate and it was good. I've never used it and I've probably forgotten all the moves anyway, but what it did was teach me discipline. I enjoyed it. I started when I was about eight years old and my sister is a black belt as well.

Do you know Bryan Strauchan (Peter Hellier) from Before The Game?

Straunie! He's a classic! I've had a little bit to



Paul in oil; the portrait by Ross Watson.

do with him when he comes around to the club trying to get a game. In fact, when we go to the footy clinics at different schools, the kids always ask me about Straunie.

Who would you rather date: Angelina Jolie, Keira Knightly or Jessica Simpson?

That's tough. Besides my girlfriend it'd be a toss up between Angelina Jolie and Jessica Simpson. I'd probably go Jolie because she'd be a more interesting to talk to.

Given the chance, would you follow in Brodie's footsteps and do reality TV?

Yeah, I would. I'd do *Dancing With The Stars*. I think what Brodie did has been good because in the past footballers didn't do that sort of stuff. Shane Crawford definitely started it and now, after Brodie, you'll find footballers doing a lot more of it.

Is the theory of no sex before the big match just a myth?

Yes, that's just a myth. But I guess every player has their own superstitions.

Are you a boxers or jocks man?

I'm a jocks guy, definitely! I like to have control down there. I don't like to be loose and flopping around everywhere.

Did you support Collingwood as a kid?

Yeah. I always dreamed about playing for Collingwood and now I bump into kids every day who say the same thing.

Do you remember seeing Collingwood win the flag in 1990?

Yes, as a supporter, I was wrapped. I think the best thing is how in that one particular game you've got the opportunity to make so many people happy.

How does it feel to win a game?

It's good fun. This year we've won most of our games and there is so much hard work that goes into them. The coaches, the players, everyone. So when you win it's all worthwhile and so enjoyable. 🍷