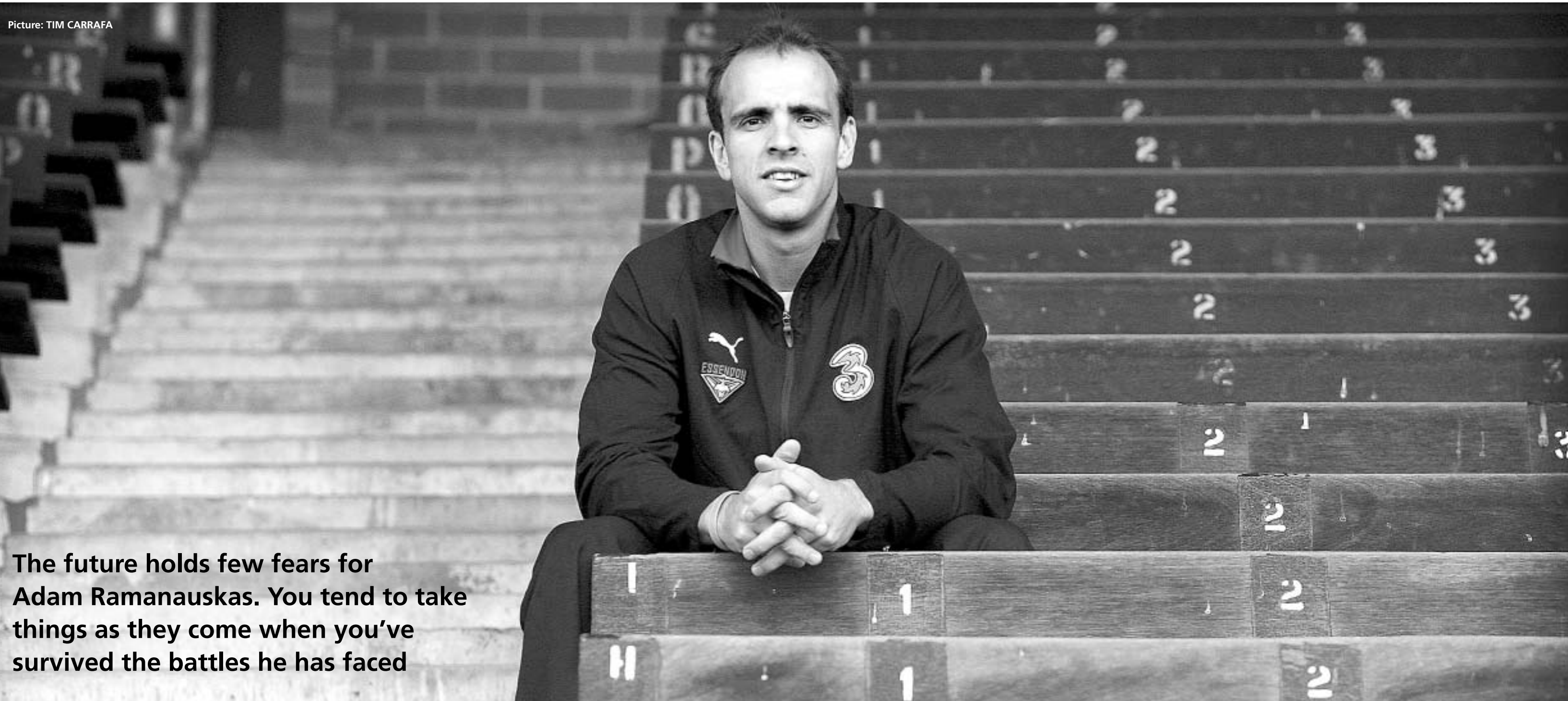


Picture: TIM CARRAFA



The future holds few fears for Adam Ramanuskas. You tend to take things as they come when you've survived the battles he has faced

'THE BEST STORY IN FOOTBALL'

There is no doubt in Kevin Sheedy's mind what is the greatest achievement he has seen during his time in football.

"Rama's probably the best," Sheedy said.

"I believe you've got 10 great stories in your life as a coach and his is unmatched.

"Rama's got one of the best attitudes of all time and just lives for the day."

Two brave comebacks, in 2003 and 2006, have defined the journey of Ramanuskas.

This season has been most rewarding because he has continued his clean bill of health.

"I'm feeling great, obviously I still get my regular checks and I can't complain," Ramanuskas said.

"It's quite good to play a season of football without the worry of what might happen. I'm just playing and enjoying myself and enjoying football."

He has also been kept busy working on a new business venture called FitDeck (www.fitdeck.com.au), which uses a deck of playing cards that provide exercise routines for all abilities.

It is hoped they will soon launch overseas.

"I was doing all sorts of exercises at home, but these gave me more of a guide," Ramanuskas said.

"When I learned more about it, I just became passionate about it. We're a bit of a lazy nation at the moment and we don't do too much. This is something that is just simple.

The main message really is the healthy lifestyle and healthy wellbeing as well. That's what we're trying to get across to people. There is a bit of an obesity problem and this can help in some way so it's something good to do outside football."

Ramanuskas is also steadily rebuilding his physical strength with



Brave: Adam Ramanuskas has a chat with Kevin Sheedy.

the help of long-time friend and club conditioning coach John Quinn.

"It's more just continually getting that fitness base back again," he said.

"I missed a few pre-seasons so it's getting that back into you and that hardens you for an AFL year. I think I'm as close as I can be to what I was, within the limitations that I've got."

Sheedy, who was in Perth last week watching the Bombers' inspiring win over Fremantle, said Ramanuskas still had plenty to offer the side.

"He didn't even rotate off the bench (last week), he played all over the ground like a vacuum cleaner," Sheedy said.

"Without Rama's two goals they don't win. He's probably a player who you could say gets 75 per cent of game time, similar to (Michael) Voss and (James) Hird in their final years."

"That's the value of four on the bench and he's a classic case for why you have it."

ADAM AT EASE

ADAM Ramanuskas is unsure of his next challenge. There are few genuine battles left when you have twice beaten cancer.

Coaching and an involvement in sport are on his radar, but the truth is he spends little time stressing about the future.

At season's end the inspirational Bomber is out of contract, but with familiar optimism he is unfazed.

"There's no concern for me whatsoever," Ramanuskas, 27, said.

"When the time's right we'll sit down and we'll talk, and we'll go from there. It's not a concern to me.

"I'm just happy to be playing footy again and, more importantly, just enjoying myself and enjoying a healthy life.

"I'm still young, so hopefully there's a couple of good years left in me yet."

The Ramanuskas file is a remarkable feel-good story of courage and determination. He didn't play in 2006 and managed only five games last season.

He started well this year, but the signs were ominous when he was dropped in Round 9.

Ramanuskas admits he was undone and he decided he simply needed to work harder.



JACKIE EPSTEIN

He earned a recall in Round 12 and has since shown the versatility which makes him a valuable member of the line-up.

He is comfortable with his predicament and relationship with coach Matthew Knights.

"At the time he (Knights) just said to go back and get a little bit of form," Ramanuskas said.

"That's the great thing about him, he's very honest with his players, and we can be open and honest with him, too, about how we're feeling.

"So it was no worry at all in terms

of playing in the reserves. You're still an important part of the team.

"I could be back there at any time of the year, but while you continue to just play good football, you let that worry about itself.

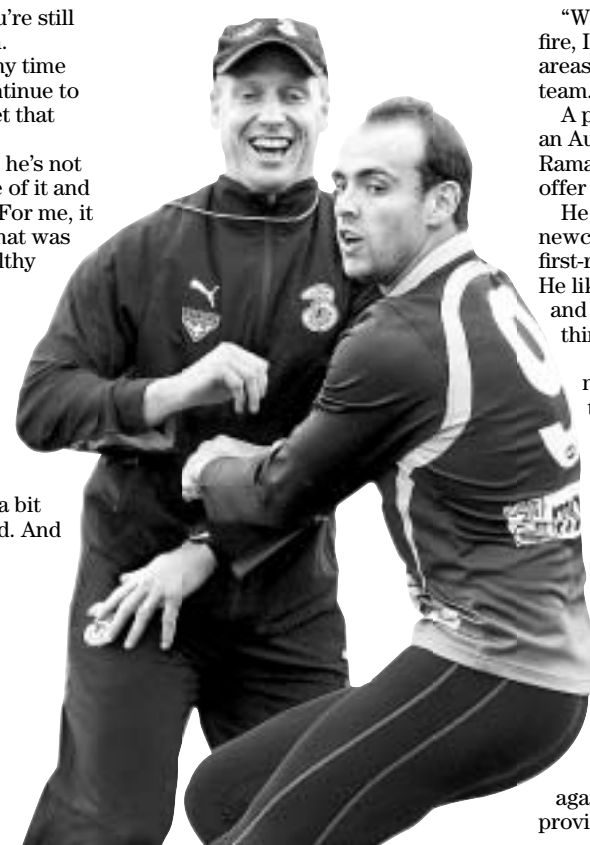
"I always miss footy (when he's not playing), the competitive side of it and the camaraderie of the boys. For me, it was about getting back and that was my sign that I was fit and healthy again.

"And that was at whatever level - didn't matter if it was AFL or VFL or local footy.

That was a sign that I was up and going again as a person.

"I'm very fortunate that the club had faith in me to keep me around.

"Last year was going to be a bit tough because I hadn't trained. And this year things are going OK.



"While I'm not setting the world on fire, I feel I can contribute in certain areas where we need help in the team."

A premiership player and an Australian representative, Ramanuskas knows he has much to offer Essendon's young list.

He is impressed by the recent newcomers, particularly the club's first-round pick last year, David Myers. He likes to see a strong work ethic and is proud "they've all shown a real thirst for making it in the AFL."

"It's quite strange, I guess I see my role to definitely help develop those guys," he says.

"It's well-documented that the first and second-year guys are the future of our club and we need to fast-track those guys, they're the real future of our club.

"It's necessary to help the senior guys have some success before they finish up."

Without hesitation, Ramanuskas speaks of imminent success. The evidence is there - the developing side has strung together three wins in a row. A rare triumph on the road against Fremantle last week provided further encouragement.



Leaders: From left, Essendon's Ricky Dyson, Jobe Watson and Adam Ramanuskas purify themselves at the temizuya, Mount Hiei in Otsu, Shiga, Japan.

"I kicked a few goals and got a bit excited, which is a bit unlike me," Ramanuskas said.

"It was a bit of a reunion over there with Mark Johnson, 'Solly' (Dean Solomon) and 'Harvs' (Mark Harvey) and 'Wally' (Dean Wallis).

"It worked out nicely with Johnno's

200th and we celebrated with him. It was really nice to beat them.

"We started the year real well and then we had a stretch where we played poorly. Hopefully now, with a little bit of momentum, we can continue it to the end of the season.

"It was always going to take time

for the guys to learn how 'Knights' wanted us to play for him. His style has been well-documented - a real up-tempo, attacking style. But at the same time we had to concentrate on the defensive side of our game and I think that's what we've done in recent weeks.

"It was never going to be like the new coach walks in and we were going to understand what he wanted us to do straight away. It was always going to take time and it will continue to take time.

"We might not be playing the way he wants us to until halfway through next year.

"I think all our boys have got a really strong understanding of what he wants now and what he expects."

Ramanuskas developed a close relationship with Knights on a leadership trip to Japan. He said it had been an enjoyable transition from the post-Kevin Sheedy-James Hird to the new Knights-led phase.

A friend and mentor, Ramanuskas has no doubt Knights is the right man for the job.



"It's funny, things have to come to an end and you move on, but at the same time we're a proud club and we try to celebrate our history and remember our history," he said.

"And those two guys (Sheedy and Hird) have been an integral part of it. (Knights's) passion and enthusiasm that he shows to one, the club; and two, the playing group is amazing.

"I think a lot of the players actually work off his energy. The way he prepares the team and individuals for the coming game is just great.

"The best thing about him is you always know where you stand and for me personally that's all you ever want."

C M Y K PAGE 48 SHS 6-JUL-2008 FRST