

## **Billy Vojtek**

Billy Vojtek was one of the most gifted footballers of his generation. Born in Croatia in 1943, his father brought him to Australia in 1956. Starting at Essendon juniors Billy represented Victoria at Undern 13 to Undern 18 and went to training with Croatia when it was playing in Geelong in 1961. Travelling regularly was out of the question, but the next year Frank Burin brought the Croatia club to Maribyrnong Speedway and coach Bozo Basic quickly spotted the young talent in Vojtek.

Billy Vojtek made his debut for Croatia (Melbourne) then playing in Division One North. In 1962, at the age of 19, Vojtek was the top scorer for his club and won its best and fairest trophy. In 1968 he was a key figure in a tremendous year for the club, which was coached by Mijo Kiss, as it finished as champion seven points clear of Polonia. In addition Croatia won the Ampol Cup and the Dockerty Cup to complete an extraordinary triumph.

Season 1969 produced another Dockerty Cup and a fourth place finish in the League. Meanwhile Vojtek had come to the notice of both the Victorian and Australian selectors. In 1966 he played against the mighty AS Roma at Olympic Park in front a record crowd of over 36,000 fans and against Greece on 11 August when Victoria held the Greek team to a scoreless draw. He scored one of the goals in a three nil win over South Australia at the Hindmarsh Stadium that year. He turned out for Victoria 34 times in all, scoring 12 goals.

In 1967 he was part of the Australian squad that completed a ten match unbeaten Asian tour under coach Joe Vlasits, including winning the first international trophy during the Vietnam War. Then in 1970 Rale Rasic took him on the world tour from which the nucleus of the successful 1974 team emerged. Vojtek only missed one Socceroo game out of 31 international matches between 1967 and 1971.

When Croatia was expelled from the VSF in 1972, Vojtek went to north and starred with Sydney Croatia in 1973 before Juventus brought him back to Melbourne in June 1974 and he won the Bill Fleming Medal the next year. In 1977 Essendon Lions, about to become Essendon Croatia, came calling and he had two years there before joining Green Gully in 1979.

An achilles tendon injury brought his top level career to an end, but he continued to play and coach. He helped Green Gully win the Ampol Cup in 1979, then had spells at Western Suburbs, St Albans Dinamo, Essendon Triestina and the youth team at Melbourne Croatia where he oversaw the development of a number of future stars including Mark Viduka and his own son, Damian. He was a unanimous choice in the Melbourne Knights team of the century.