



Champions of the cause

Footballers using their fame for charitable purposes are giving role models a good name.

Aussie rules is the most popular spectator sport in Australia, according to Topend Sports, elevating some players to celebrity status and condemning others to notoriety.

As the debate swirls about whether AFL players should be considered role models, there is no denying their actions garner widespread attention.

The reach of AFL players who capitalise on the adulation they receive to champion causes is remarkable.

Jimmy Bartel's 95,400 Instagram followers saw him awarded the Jim Stynes Community Leadership Award on Brownlow Medal night, recognising his efforts in raising awareness of domestic violence.

Since being diagnosed with motor neurone disease, Neale Daniher has campaigned exhaustively to raise funds for a cure. Through his football connections, \$2.5 million was donated from just one event—The Big Freeze in 2015.

St Kilda's Nick Riewoldt and his cousin Jack, from Richmond, created a foundation with their families in June 2015.

"Maddie's Vision" was formed to raise funds for research into aplastic anaemia, after Nick's sister died from the condition.

Riewoldt says, "Maddie's Vision was to make a difference to the lives of sufferers, she didn't want them to go through what she went through. She wanted to be an advocate for the cause, ensure that others became more educated on BMFS (Bone Marrow Failure Syndrome), improve treatments and ultimately to find a cure."

The CEO of Maddie's Vision, Nicky Long, says they have raised \$1 million



Campaign: Jimmy Bartel.

in the past 12 months to fund medical research. A large chunk of that resulted from two AFL games, Maddie's Match in July 2015, which raised around \$300,000, and Rooy's 300th in April 2016, which amassed some \$260,000.

Riewoldt credits the AFL for providing a platform for his family to bring attention to this disease.

"We are in a fortunate position to be starting a not-for-profit given the profile Maddie's story had already generated through the football media," he said.

"It gave us a huge advantage in raising awareness and funds. Also, being part of the wider football family meant that as a family we were incredibly well supported in dealing with our grief—we were embraced by so many and are so grateful for that."

Running onto the ground for Maddie's Match was quite emotional. "It was an extremely difficult, draining period as Jack and I were out promoting the game daily. We happily did it of course and it was entirely necessary to establish a presence for Maddie's Vision."

"Maddie would have been so proud to see her name was plastered all over Etihad Stadium and the sea of purple."

After being actively involved in all aspects of Maddie's Vision initially, Riewoldt now focuses on PR and is planning another Maddie's Match for 2017. Raising awareness of community issues also appears to be much easier with an AFL profile.

Ex-West Coast Eagle defender David Wirrpanda felt so strongly about creating a positive impact in Aboriginal



Vision: Nick and Jack Riewoldt.

communities that he set up his own not-for-profit foundation and recruited former Sydney Swans and Fremantle player Troy Cook to assist him.

Growing up in Carnarvon, Cook admits, "we weren't really exposed to any sort of role models."

Interested in being part of Wirrpanda's initiative in 2005, he worked part-time until retiring from AFL in 2007 and becoming a full-time employee. Originating in Perth with a handful of staff, the foundation now runs programs throughout Australia, reaching around 25,000 Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal people.

Cook delivers a health and leadership program into primary and high schools in the Mandurah and Peel region.

"We focus on everything," he says. That includes building resilience, road safety, promoting leadership skills, drug and alcohol awareness, arming students with the tools to make good decisions, nutrition and encouraging them to remain positive. Cook agrees his and Wirrpanda's profiles paved their way.

"We're lucky enough to have had the careers that we've had and it makes it easy for us to go into particular schools. It's not a footy program."

"[A] bit of sports involved to try and engage them [and] a big component is to make sure they're fit and healthy. But it's all [about] the other life skills and encouraging them to make the right choices along the way."

Just over a year ago, The Wirrpanda Foundation introduced a mentoring program for boys due to leave Banksia Hill Juvenile Detention Centre.

They also maintain regular contact with the boys once they were released. "It's only new and it's a challenging space but it should be a rewarding one, once they get out and they stay out for a long period of time."

Cook finds it rewarding to witness the students who come through the foundation "see the change within themselves" when they enter the workforce and are able to support their families. Former Swans player and Fremantle coach Gerard Neesham also finds it "extremely rewarding" when



Foundations: David Wirrpanda and support team.

the Aboriginal children he mentors graduate and secure jobs.

After he left the Dockers, Neesham returned to teaching. He noticed the boys at Clontarf Aboriginal College appeared disconnected from learning and attendance was poor. His idea was to entice the boys into attending school by creating a football program. He asked Ross Kelly (the Fremantle Chairman responsible for his exit from the Dockers), for his support.

"Ross agreed to help me set up a foundation in August 1999 and he's been chairman of the foundation and a huge guidance ever since that day. Without his guidance and support and direction, we wouldn't be anywhere near what we are."

The Clontarf Academy runs in conjunction with the college but

'The end game is we're not needed.'

— Gerard Neesham



Profile: Gerard Neesham.

remains independent.

Starting out Neesham says he approached PE teachers throughout the Perth metropolitan area, querying if any Aboriginal children who might be "slipping through the gaps" wanted to take part in an overnight camp. He received only 16 replies, but 91 boys showed up—"so we were real shocked."

He concedes his name "definitely helped open doors in the beginning" but believes the boys would have been excited to have any ex-AFL coach at their school.

"It didn't have to be me. The profile of being an AFL coach was really attractive to them."

Sixteen years later the academy employs 250 full-time staff and there are 4700 boys in programs across Australia.

"It's all good but there's plenty more kids [who] could benefit from it," says Neesham. "We're quite driven to get our program into every corner that it's needed."

Neesham became aware of the need for such an academy through circumstances he experienced first-hand but his hope is that eventually it will not be necessary.

"The end game is we're not needed." In a perfect world the need for all these charities would cease to exist, but if AFL players are prepared to share their own personal struggles, be hands-on and promote awareness of important issues so others can benefit, then they should proudly accept the mantle of role models.



MND warrior: Neale Daniher.