



HOME AND AWAY

Host families play a vital role in helping young draftees remain grounded, shifting worries off their plate while heaping food on it.

Only a small percentage of the nation's registered footballers ever get to experience the thrill of being drafted into an AFL club.

"It's been a dream forever," said Luke Partington. "Pretty much since I started playing footy at five or six years old.

"I was willing to move anywhere to be able to play footy."

Picked up by the West Coast Eagles in last year's national draft, the then 18-year-old from rural South Australia packed his hopes and football boots and travelled thousands of kilometres to Perth.

The excitement of joining an elite-level club was marred only by the trepidation of moving to unfamiliar surroundings, far from family and friends.

AFL clubs vary in how their interstate recruits are managed. Some move them in with senior players for several months and others relocate them into a share house with other teammates.

Ian Miller, player services coordinator at West Coast, is a staunch advocate of placing young footballers with host families.

He is adamant that a comfortable family environment—including



Mine host: The Godley family with Lukas Webb (left) and Caleb Daniel.

nutritious home-cooked meals eaten while chatting around the dining table, laundered football gear and readily available emotional or physical support—allows the players to focus solely on football.

Partington had already lived away from home as a 15-year-old while at boarding school in Adelaide, but credits Judy and Richard Smirk, who decided to become host parents once their fourth child left home, for making his transition to life in WA easier.

"I'm a great believer that these sorts of environments at the elite level just turn them into better people," Richard Smirk said.

"All the training they do when not on the field is now about culture, respect and values.

"Ian Miller ensures their values and that culture is adapted into their home environment as well."

The Smirk's first boarder was Malcolm Karpany, an indigenous footballer from Moonta, South Australia who trekked west in 2013.

Karpany admits the intensity of pre-season training was so tough he wanted only to relax and sleep when away from the club and couldn't imagine finding the energy to cook and clean for himself.

He highly recommends young players move in with a host family so

they can "find their balance between footy and a social life".

While Karpany was still living with the Smirks, West Coast signed a young Irish lad named Patrick Brophy who flew halfway across the world to be a professional athlete.

"I played Gaelic football in Ireland and it's all amateur, even when you get to the top level," Brophy said.

"I'd grown up admiring guys like Jim Stynes and Tadhg Kennelly who took the plunge ... and they became successful from it."

Brophy is happily settled in Perth now, but struggled with homesickness when he returned from Ireland after Christmas in 2014.

Uncertain about his decision and his future, he acknowledges how the Smirks helped him cope.

"It was great to live the first year with them, but I felt at my age—I'm 22 now—it was time for a bit of independence," he said.

"I still come over to them once a week, we have dinner and we still get along great.

"I didn't know how easy I had it at the host family with them cooking and cleaning everything so it's been a bit of a shock to the system."

Sherryl and John Gardiner have no children of their own, but being surrounded by a plethora of nieces and nephews prepared them for hosting a series of teenagers—from Matt Rosa's arrival in 2004 to Beau Maister, Mitch Brown, Gerrick Weedon, Michael Mascoulis and,

currently, Liam Duggan.

Sherryl Gardiner believes they all succumb to a twinge of homesickness.

"I think that's because when they arrive they've been drafted as an AFL player, they think they're an AFL player and their expectations of getting a game are very high, but their bodies are not ready for it.

"They do get very disappointed if they don't get games in the first year."

Cheryl Godley has been a host mother for Western Bulldogs draftees since 2008, even though she supports Richmond.

She feels one of the biggest issues the players encounter is diet.

"A few of them have no idea," she said. "They live on Coca-Cola and potato chips. One lived on gnocchi and a jar of pasta sauce."

As most of the players have never

left home before, she ensures their washing is done, that they establish a routine and eat healthy.

She also teaches them to cook to enable them to be self-sufficient when they move out.

Current players she has cared for include Jason Johannisen, Lukas Webb, Caleb Daniel and Kieran Collins. They have all stayed between six and 12 months.

When recruiting host families, Miller prefers understanding, down-to-earth people who live relatively close to training.

Stipulations include a house large enough for the players to have their own bedroom, bathroom and activity area—and one without the distraction of teenage girls or young children.

He also meets the draftees and their parents in order to match them up

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with compatible host families.

Indigenous liaison officer Phil Narkle speaks with the families of indigenous draft picks to ensure they consent to their child being placed with a non-indigenous family.

Judy Smirk said Narkle often checked in with Karpny.

Richard Smirk added: "We encourage them to treat this as if it's their house because effectively it is.

"With that comes a certain level of responsibility and respect. We treat them like they're our own children.

"Being a footballer is a unique occupation. Their social network doesn't often extend out past that, but there's enough people in the club and they can find commonality in what they do.

"A lot of credit goes to the club for recognising that the (home) environment they put them into shapes what they do as a footballer," he said.

"Providing them stability in the host family just gives them the best opportunity to actually do what they are paid to do.

"From our perspective it's just about providing that stable home environment."

The role of a host parent is indefinable. They chauffeur players to and from the airport, watch their games, teach them to drive, take them to purchase cars, cut up their meals

after they've had shoulder surgery, deliver hats to weddings and complete handyman maintenance on their houses. They also reassure their "real" families their sons are being cared for and that they have not usurped their role, get chastised for leaving games early and forego their freedom to take an in-season holiday.

But they wouldn't have it any other way. All the host parents treat the players as extensions of their own families and value the lifelong bonds that are formed. Brown and his wife Shae Bolton come over for dinner with the Gardiners—and Duggan—every Wednesday.

Rosa moved to Queensland last October after joining the Gold Coast Suns, but phones Sherryl Gardiner each week and visits the family, along with his wife Hayley, when in Perth.

The Gardiner's pride over these boys is unmistakable.

Sherryl Gardiner considers them "very precious" and John enjoys seeing them develop from teenagers to adulthood while coping with a high-pressure environment.

Judy Smirk feels the same way. "Young kids need parental influence ... a bit of guidance," she said.

"Whether these kids make it or not, I love the fact we've had the opportunity to help some young man who hopefully will achieve his AFL dream."



Happy (temporary) families: Sherryl and John Gardiner with Liam Duggan and Mitch Brown.