

There's something poetic about two retired footballers in tracksuits kicking around a Sherrin on unkempt grass at their local park. Removed from the harsh lights of the MCG and the gaze of millions of spectators, former Richmond players Nathan Brown and Matthew Richardson meet once a week in Elwood to have a kick of that odd-shaped ball they know so well.

"The thing I miss most about football is the competition," Brown, pictured left, says. "I also miss the camaraderie, training hard and then having lunch and a coffee with the boys."

Australian rules footballers pursue one of the few careers where retirement at 26 is not uncommon. Niggling injuries such as osteitis pubis and knee problems force many players off the field at a time when most men their age are still looking for, or are settled into, long-lasting careers. Brown says there comes a time in every footballer's career when "the penny drops" and he starts thinking about future job prospects. Brown, who retired last year as a result of a persistent groin injury, is now the founder and designer of Blackbyrd, a stylish clothing label with its flagship store in Chapel Street, Prahran.

The former Tiger proudly guides *MW* around his shop and takes us upstairs, where next season's range of pretty floral dresses, plaid shirts and signature graphic T-shirts hang on racks. Although Brown launched T-shirt label Lenny and Blackbyrd while he was still playing for Richmond, he wasn't able to commit himself wholeheartedly to either venture, due to the demanding nature of professional football.

Making the transition from football to a full-time job in the fashion industry was a difficult task for the 32-year-old. "It's very different to being in a football club. In an office environment you can't say the same things you'd say at training, people take offence quite easily. I've noticed a big difference in the way people work. It's been good for me to open up my eyes and see that football isn't the be all and end all."

Brown says he never really recovered from his horrific leg snap in 2005: "I don't think I was ever the same afterwards – psychologically to start with and physically in the long term. I wish it never happened, but it did, and I've had to move on from it."

Retired Hawthorn player Rayden Tallis,

manager of career transitions programs for AFL SportsReady, says footballers haven't always adapted to their post-sport life as easily as Brown. "In the late '90s, when football became professional and players had to be available 9 to 5, the sport didn't allow them to engage with any other type of work. Some players came out of a successful football career after 10 years, but their skills in an industry outside football were limited."

In an effort to ensure footballers had the skills to succeed in other professions, AFL SportsReady and the AFL Players Association launched its Next Goal program in 2002. The initiative gives footballers the opportunity

to engage in work experience during their sporting careers, whether it be preparing a meal for elephants as a zookeeper like one current St Kilda player, or working in real estate, law or small businesses. "It costs companies nothing to take on an AFL player," Tallis says. "The high-profile player who comes into their work networks and walks away with valuable skills – or alternatively discovers that a particular industry is not for them, which we also deem a success."

Retired Adelaide player Ken McGregor is a Next Goal program success story. After doing work experience as a journalist during his career, McGregor took on a cadetship with the *Adelaide Advertiser* when his AFL career ended and now works as a full-time journalist. In addition to the Next Goal program, the AFL Players Association also runs an apprenticeship program, which covers everything from money management to diet and offers players education grants for university, TAFE, certificates and short courses.

The myth of the unmotivated off-field footballer who "sits on the couch and plays Playstation" is completely untrue, Tallis says. "There are not many players who are doing nothing and if they are, clubs come down on them. Senior coaches want their players to come out of football as better people who are ready to take on life and all its responsibilities."

Although many retired footballers gravitate towards completely different careers, delisted Carlton player Jordan Bannister decided to go down another path and become an AFL umpire. "I wanted to stay in football, but I was a bit burnt-out," the 27-year-old Brighton resident says. "I'd had a lot of surgery and had been suspended a few times and needed a new challenge." The Blues player received a call from director of umpiring Jeff Gieschen and was asked to take part in the league's AFL player-to-umpire pathway.

Bannister now trains intensively with the umpires panel and spends his weekends awarding free kicks and blowing whistles at local leagues Northern, Eastern, Geelong and the Victorian Amateur Football Association. "I have improved a lot during the year; when I umpired my first game I was getting yelled at by the crowd," he says. "Eventually I want to umpire AFL matches, however long it takes me."

Bannister says many of his previous perceptions about umpires have been challenged. "I thought everyone was going to be very serious, but it's a similar culture to the AFL; they love to talk about footy and love the game. I've never been part of a team that is as supportive – because there's a lot of negative feedback coming from the outside world, the group have to make up for it. You couldn't meet more positive guys."

Retired St Kilda player

Andrew Jobling

was forced abruptly to adapt to the next stage of his life. When he was a hungover 23-year-old, Jobling turned to the sports section of the Saturday newspaper to discover his sacking from St Kilda in bold font.

"It was a real shock," he says. "I didn't see it coming. I blamed



Andrew Jobling

PETER WEAVING



Rayden Tallis

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the club, the coaches, and I resented them for a long time. It was pretty devastating for a while, but then you move on."

Jobling, who is now 45, played football at a time when there were no managers, and players worked full-time to make ends meet. "It is definitely harder now than it was then – we were equipped to deal with things normal people had to deal with, like getting up and going to work and managing money." During his football career Jobling studied and then worked as a school teacher, and has since forged a name for himself as a motivational speaker, personal trainer and author of *Eat Chocolate, Drink Alcohol and Be Lean and Healthy*.

Although Jobling has moved on from his football past he has held onto a few items to remind him of his time as a Saint. "I have a footy card. Most players get a card of them taking a mark or handballing, but my card is of me falling over, which I might add, I did really well." He also owns a video with footage of a young, skinny Jobling being knocked out and carried off the ground on a stretcher during his first senior game. "I sometimes watch that to remind me I'm glad I'm not a footballer any more." ■



Jordan Bannister

STEPHEN MCKENZIE