

Field Ump Fridman Leading The Way

Australian football has been littered with heart-breaking stories of star players who, through the cruel fate of chronic injury, could never reach their true potential. Names like Matthew Egan, Max Bailey, Sean Rusling and Scott Gumbleton are all synonymous with unfulfilled talent, having burst on to the big stage only to be cut down in their prime and fade from the public consciousness.

But one local footy star has refused to let his horrific run with injury end his involvement in the sport he loves.

Last year Ilya Fridman turned to umpiring as a way to regain his fitness and core strength after long stints on the sidelines. But what started off initially as a rehab and fitness program has now become his passion and he is relishing the opportunity to continue his on-field involvement in community football.

“You’ve got the best seat on the ground; you’re in the middle of the action the whole time... It’s absolutely fantastic,” Fridman enthused on the eve of the SFNL’s Community Umpiring Round.

The 27-year-old is now in his second year of umpiring after previously experiencing the highs and lows of footy during his playing career, which began with the Bentleigh Under 17’s in 2004.

After impressing with the Demons’ Under 19’s side, he joined the Casey Scorpions in the VFL where he was taught valuable lessons about the game within a professional environment. But when work commitments forced a reluctant return to local football after just one season, he resumed playing with his mates at Bentleigh and helped the senior team claim the VAFA D3 premiership in 2009.

He then crossed to Dingley which was where his injury curse began. He had a delayed start to his debut year at Souter Oval with glandular fever and then a collar bone injury, before a dislocated knee and broken patella suffered in the final two minutes of his return match ended his season.

In a bid to fast-track his return to football, Fridman began running prematurely, and in the process suffered lower back and spinal injuries from over compensation and once again found himself back at square one.

It was then that a couple of his workmates suggested he consider getting involved with umpiring in a bid to help him through his injury rehabilitation.

“I thought I’ll at least try to keep my fitness up by still staying involved in local footy and then I enjoyed it last year and I thought I might keep going with it,” Fridman explained.

Fridman has no doubt that his playing experience has helped him make a successful transition to umpiring. He remembers the qualities he appreciated in a whistle-blower from his perspective as a player, and has since tried to incorporate those same qualities into his own umpiring, not only try to earn the respect of the players in the matches he officiates, but also to ensure that everybody involved enjoys the game as much as he does.

“I really appreciated the umpires that had the time to talk to you as a player on the field when the decision’s been made, umpires that really took that extra step and explained their decision and would be really approachable... and that’s something I try to do with my umpiring,” Fridman said.

“When I go out there to umpire I go out there to enjoy it and at the same time make sure that the blokes that go out there to play enjoy the game as well.

“We’re all involved in local footy and so we’ve gotta treat each another with respect so that’s what I try to do on the field.”

Fridman isn’t the first former footballer to make the transition to officiating. Of the current crop of AFL umpires, Leigh Fisher and Jordan Bannister have both played over 50 games of AFL footy. These two are men that Fridman really admires, given he understands from his own experience what is required to succeed at the elite level.

“(These) blokes have come through the ranks of playing and have taken that side step (while) at the same time keeping the professionalism and doing what it takes to stay at that level, which is phenomenal. They’re the sort of blokes you look up to,” Fridman said.

However, unlike many of his contemporaries, Fridman harbours no burning desire to progress his officiating career to a higher level. Instead, he prefers to “stay local” while honing his skills.

There have been challenges along the way for Fridman, including trying to overcome the mental scarring associated with his succession of serious injuries. But he says it’s the fitness aspect of the job that he finds the most difficult.

It’s a sign of the strength of his character, too, that he uses this difficulty as motivation to better himself and get himself into the best possible physical condition.

“The challenge every week is making sure that you’re looking after yourself and you’re constantly keeping that fitness up coz as soon as that starts to drop off, I guess the umpiring and your ability to keep up with the game will drop off as well,” he said.

Fridman’s dedication and passion for umpiring is obvious and he encourages young people to get involved in it as he believes it’s a pursuit that has a multitude of benefits.

“Give it a go. Even if you just get down to training, have a run, get a feel for it. It’s absolutely fantastic,” Fridman said.

“For anyone – young boys or girls who are at school who are thinking of having a part-time job, umpiring would definitely be one of the things (I’d encourage).

“It teaches you a lot of life skills in terms of building your confidence, your ability to communicate... you’re always keeping fit. And then there’s a bit of the monetary side of things as well. You actually get paid to do it!

“I wish I got into it a lot earlier.”