

After the final siren



There is plenty to love about a career in elite sport, starting with fame and fortune. But long after top athletes take their final step off the field, the costs become all too clear. **Thomas Hunter** investigates how sports stars cope with life once the cheering dies down.

After winning her 17th and final World Cup gold medal, Kirstie Marshall was justifiably elated. Through a combination of hard work, skill, determination and self-sacrifice, Marshall had risen to the top of her sport, and stayed there. Not only had she become one of the all-time greatest aerial skiers, she had done so in a sport Australians – better known for their speed in the pool or skill on a surfboard – hadn't traditionallyaced.

Those new to watching aerial skiing soon learned that it's one of the world's most punishing sports. Even though it doesn't involve physical contact, aerial skiers can expect to suffer injuries similar to those AFL footballers endure: knee reconstructions chief among them. Shoulder, ankle and head injuries are also common; neck injuries are rarer but also a risk.

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But in the world of professional sport, concerns about personal safety are often shaded by an intense desire to compete, the single-mindedness to win, and the addictive rush of victory. Until, that is, one leaves the sport. While the memories of being among the best in the world will last a lifetime, the physical, personal and professional costs of dedication may never be lost either.

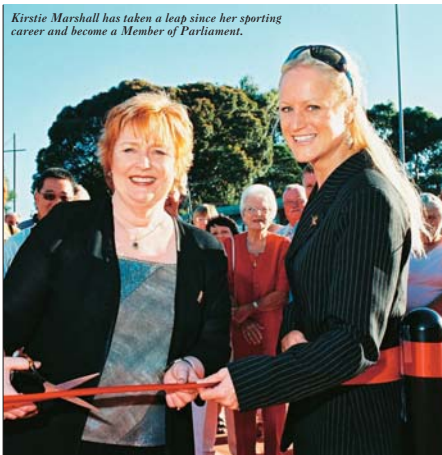
“My first knee injury was in 1992 and between then and 1998 I had 13 knee operations,” Marshall tells *Linkslife*. “When I was injured in 1998 it was made very clear to me that to get back I would need enormous support. There was nothing the administrators of the sport would do to help me. I was pretty much just told to go out and fix it myself. If I got back under my own steam, at my own expense, that was all well and good, but if that didn't happen, it was more or less a case of see you later.”

With her skiing career in limbo, Marshall faced the question all athletes eventually face: what now? Like many in her situation, she identified coaching as a way of passing the time productively until her body healed.

"Then I hit my first hurdle. There was no financial support, there was no skill support, there was nothing. So I applied to coach and I was told that I couldn't. I even applied for a coaching scholarship which was turned down because the Ski Federation wouldn't endorse me. At that time a career in skiing was the only thing I felt comfortable doing, but I was flatly refused entry into the sport at any level other than competition. It's not like they advised me I'd be better off doing sponsorship or event management. I wasn't given any other options. I felt I was being pushed out of the sport. So I gave up on skiing and tried to find work through media outlets and so forth, but nothing happened. Nobody wanted to give me a job."

Marshall's experience is not exclusive to aerial skiers. Since sport became professional, it has gobbled up young people and trained them to perform feats of physical brilliance for fans, clubs, the nation and themselves. The focus required to maintain peak performance leaves very little room for pursuing a trade or meeting the rigours of a university degree. It can make the transition from athlete to non-athlete an awkward one.

Kirstie Marshall has taken a leap since her sporting career and become a Member of Parliament.



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Steven Alessio looks over the future of young AFL stars.

This difficult changeover for athletes is now being recognised by progressive sporting bodies around the world. In Aussie Rules, the AFL Players Association (AFLPA) believes it's leading the world in the pioneering initiatives it's engaging to prepare players for their post-sporting life. Through the AFLPA, young players attend a host of training programs that have nothing to do with sharking a ball from a ruck contest or kicking to the advantage of your team mates.

Former Essendon champion Steven Alessio, head of the player development arm of the AFLPA, says those playing footy full time now have a range of services available to help with life as a footballer and beyond.

"For players leaving the sport or coming to the end of their careers, we offer a range of services, from help with opening a business to education and health," says Alessio. "For players who retire or are delisted, we sit down with them and work out a plan for their next step. It's a very important part of players' lives, because for some it's going back to square one in career terms."

The AFLPA supplies everything from educational guidance, to contact with a network of elite athlete-friendly universities. For players with literacy or numeracy issues, there are tutors available, and there are educational forums run at clubs throughout the year.

"All of the services in terms of funding for education and training grants and workplace programs are still available up to three years after players have finished their on-field careers. On top of that we also have a retirement fund which players can access for up to a year after they finish their playing careers. That can help with opening a business or consolidating a loan



Corey Jones' post-sport career is well under construction.

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that will help them go into a particular type of work – basically for anything that will help them transition out of the game."

One current AFL player who has an eye firmly on the future is North Melbourne forward Corey Jones. Still in the middle of his sporting career, Jones is paving the way for a career after sport. He works for Hermitage Homes when his footy schedule allows.

"I'm lucky in a way. I've always known what I wanted to do. I worked before I was drafted but there are a lot of guys out there who've never worked and haven't finished year 12 because they were drafted early. They went straight into the AFL and there's a good chance they've not yet decided what they want to do when their careers finish."

Jones is already putting his skills into action at LinksLiving Sandhurst Club estate, where Hermitage Homes are building a home which will be auctioned to raise money for the Kangaroos. "It's a great opportunity to get some experience out there. Maybe you can cruise through the first couple of years of your (sport) career but it does pass you by quickly. The average life of a footballer is only three to four years, so you really need to get out there and keep yourself involved right from the time your career starts."

Nowadays, each AFL club has a player welfare officer who connects players to the services provided by the AFLPA and has a day-to-day role in maintaining each player's health and wellbeing.

"We're trying to shape their playing behaviours *and* life behaviours," says Simon Lloyd, high performance manager at Collingwood. "For example, players will attend sessions on tax returns, health and nutrition, media training, financial planning, career planning, computer training, TAC training, and first aid. So it's really a holistic approach to their lives off the field."

"Preparation for the end of a player's career is actually a long process. It's initiated at the beginning of a football career and then continued through the football years and is only completed when a successful transition to a post-football career and lifestyle has been achieved."

Some time around the middle of each year, Lloyd and his colleagues know there will be a number of players who are "no longer required" by the club, which gives them a head-start on preparing for the moment in the meeting room when a young man is told that, potentially, his playing days are over.

"It's not pleasant and players go through all types of different trauma. But it's every club's responsibility to help them come to terms with the anger and sadness and frustration they may experience. But in saying that, the idea is that with all of the training they do in matters unrelated to football, you hope their new skills will help them through tough times like delisting and will stand them in good stead for their post-playing careers."

"But to give you an idea of how tough it is for someone to succeed at the top level, when players first come into the system at Collingwood each year, we give them the senior list from five years ago and get them to go through and work out how many of them are still playing. It's a low number, and it's an important reality check."

For players of generations past, those words will almost sound like they are being spoken in a foreign language. While today's players are looked after off the field in both a physical and social sense, increasingly, past players are returning to clubs looking for assistance with health complaints that failed to present until decades after they hung up their boots. Ronnie Wearmouth, whose career at Collingwood spanned 13 years, hasn't fared as well as many of today's players will.

"I didn't leave the game with much at all and the way I am now, I'll never capitalise on my life," he told the *Herald Sun* in July this year. Now, 7000 ex-footballers have formed the X-Men, a lobby group seeking financial compensation from the AFL to help cope with the physical and mental side-effects of their playing careers. X-Men president Ron O'Dwyer says the group is asking for "a small percentage of the money the AFL has gained from TV rights ... but we've been informed that we're not really on their radar."

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While the AFL might take some convincing, in May last year the AFLPA announced a fund would be set up to assist retired players with medical expenses. The \$2 million target will come from current players' wages, and will assist people like ex-Collingwood players Len Thompson and Des Tuddenham, who both had surgery in 2004 to alleviate health complaints caused by their playing careers.

Another ex-player who bears the scars of a long and distinguished playing career is ex-Melbourne stalwart Steven Febey. In an extensive interview in *The Age's Good Weekend* magazine in September 2005, journalist Richard Guilliat went some way to listing the injuries Febey suffered during his 15-year career.

"The big injuries spring to mind easily," Guilliat wrote. "The crushed eye socket, a torn pectoral muscle, broken jaw, severe bone bruising in his knee, a shattered finger, cracked ribs and repeated ankle trauma. The innumerable minor injuries – dislocated fingers, cracked ribs, torn tendons, sprains, impact concussions, spine-jarring falls, a hernia, a broken tooth – blur together."

"Once supremely fit, Febey hasn't been for a proper run since he retired, and a bike ride leaves him in pain. His eye weeps in strong wind, his fingers are gnarly and weak from their breakages, he can't hold a golf club properly and he sometimes takes sleeping pills at night to override the dull ache in his hips. Cruellest of all, he can barely kick a football."

When you look at the statistics, you can see why financial assistance becomes so important for ex-players. A report released in 2003 showed an Aussie rules player was 4000 times more likely to have a hip replacement after retirement than a member of the general community. Footballers were 2000 times more likely to receive an artificial knee joint than those who never played the game at the elite level.

In response to the findings, Nathan Gibbs, a team doctor with the Sydney Swans and Australian rugby league teams, told *The Age*: "Anyone who plays a significant number of years of AFL or rugby league is guaranteed to get premature arthritis in one or more of the lower limbs. There are no ifs or buts. Everyone will get it."

Like footballers, Kirstie Marshall also carries the physical reminders of an extended period at the top. "Well, I still have a knee injury that prevents me from doing any serious level of sport. I can't ski without pain. I can't ride a bike without pain ... I can't walk without pain. So I have ongoing complaints, but it would be up to me to claim through my health insurance for any medical costs. That's my burden just as it was when I was skiing."

Thankfully for Marshall, life after elite sport has been relatively prosperous. Soon after her retirement in 1998, Marshall, who is now the Victorian Labor Party's member for Forest Hill, had a meeting with ex-sportsman Justin Madden, the giant, highly decorated ex-Carlton ruckman. Madden has also ridden his popularity and intelligence to a job with the Victorian Labor Party and a seat in parliament. Now his office door reads 'Minister for Sport, Recreation and the Commonwealth Games'. It was Madden who encouraged Marshall to consider a new career as a member of the Labor Party.

Of course, when you ask Febey or Marshall if they would trade their playing careers for a fully fit body, the answer is just as you'd expect: "No way. It was always worth it." ■



Young AFL players are given careful guidance to prepare them for life beyond stardom.

Kangaroos House at Sandhurst Club will be auctioned for sale in October 2006. Enquiries to Peter Righetti (03) 8787 7666.