

## **Unsociable Game – Episode 04 – “New Horizons”**

### **Music (Tourist Kid) (Intro Theme)**

A repetitive, mournful synthesiser loop, with heavy bass intonation at the end.

### **Ben Rodin**

This is Unsociable Game – a podcast about concussion and community football. I’m Ben Rodin.

### **Music (Tourist Kid)**

Score fades to silence.

### **Ben Rodin**

This is Unsociable Game and I’m Ben Rodin.

Over the last three episodes, we’ve looked at concussion in community footy from the player’s lens. We’ve looked at hits, we’ve looked at what happens when the recovery process takes longer than you want, and then, when you have to decide whether you should play at all.

At the start of the series, I said there were four players at West Brunswick who either stopped or wound back playing because of concussion sustained throughout 2017. We’ve spoken to three players so far.

The fourth player’s story is a bit different to the others: Everything happened in their first year of football and it ended by the midway point of the season, but like most footballers, it starts with a personal challenge to overcome.

### **Beth Winkler**

I’m Beth Winkler.

I’m not a big like hugger, I’m not a big people contact person, and pretty much my experience, if there were things to do with sport, was running by myself, lifting by myself, all that kind of stuff, so footy’s obviously, a lot of contact, a lot of contact, a lot of contact, and yeah so all that kind of stuff was definitely new.

### **Ben Rodin**

Beth was a part of West Brunswick’s inaugural women’s playing squad, training from midway through 2016 in preparation for the 2017 season.

As a direct result of the AFLW’s formation in early 2017, there were more than 300 new women’s teams across all of Victoria – including senior, junior, metropolitan and country competitions.

However, as we’ll elaborate later, this has also meant many have come to the game new, without the experiences that male counterparts carry with them after what is sometimes a decade’s worth of junior experience.

Come the end of pre-season, just before her first practice match, Beth suffered her first

concussion.

**Beth Winkler**

Essentially I was going to get the ball off someone else who was relatively stationary. And when I went to get the ball, Georgia, at the time, turned her hip, which was quite smart, because it stopped me from getting the ball, but what it meant was that I went smack bang into her hip/base of her back and just went down and was just blacked out.

**Ben Rodin**

Like Sam Fleming, Will Stubbings and myself, it took a few weeks before Beth came back onto the field.

**Beth Winkler**

I'm a lecturer and also like a study support coordinator so a lot of it is student-facing, you know also looking over assignments. There's a lot involved and I wasn't able, I wasn't up to doing any of it.

The mobile phone was the scary thing, because I couldn't, I could not hone in, I could not focus on mobile phone, I couldn't read text messages.

**Ben Rodin**

I was curious about neurological make up so I asked Professor John Olver, of the Epworth Rehabilitation Clinic, if male and female bodies process low-level brain trauma injuries – like concussion – differently at all.

**Professor John Olver**

After a concussive injury women do less well than men. So they have a worse prognosis, but it's not completely clear why this occurs.

Some theories are related to hormones, particularly progesterone, but overall despite the research, it's not known.

**Ben Rodin**

It took four weeks before Beth started training again, despite it being her first concussion. After initially being worried about getting back into the fray, she got picked for her first game.

**Ambience**

Sound of a women's football game, with marks and umpire's whistles.

**Beth Winkler**

I go straight in. I've got the ball, and I'm about to run out, try and pass it out to the side, and this girl in front of me, again, and this is why it's a lot to do with inexperience and I'm definitely not saying I'm experienced at all in this situation, 100 percent not anything over this girl I'm sure, but she grabs the football, in like a way, that I just, you would never see it ever in a regular game.

It was kind of like a netball grab or something, where she just of put her hands forward, and kind of just went to take it from me, and then realised that she couldn't take it from me because I was about to pass it out and twisted her body around and went to try and

grab it so to she'd get more force behind her body and in doing so just whacked her head back so the back of her head, just whacked me in the face and that impact of her head on my head (laughs) sent me down, and I think it's even a stretch to say I was on the field for a minute.

### **Ben Rodin**

As a writer who has written about concussion for the Guardian, commentator, and co-host of the Outer Sanctum, a female-led podcast about all levels of football, Nicole Hayes says it's possible that new adult players, like Beth, are paying a delayed price for coming to the game later in life, because they were denied the opportunity to learn the game at an earlier age.

### **Nicole Hayes**

Some of it is actually about not having an opportunity to learn the skills, but also a part of it is just not having the exposure to the sport itself for such a long time. So there is the likelihood that that in many ways, will grow out of future generations, hopefully won't have the same concerns because they will have had a lifetime of football.

### **Ben Rodin**

Eventually, Beth starts training again, and everything is seemingly going to be okay.

Unfortunately, I really need to emphasise seemingly.

### **Beth Winkler**

I was running up the stairs and I tripped on the stairs and knocked my head on the hand rail and concussed myself again.

So that was a concussion number three!

And the doctor was like, "You know what? I'm sorry, this is not good. If you have another concussion umm, potentially that'll render you brain dead. So, no more football for you."

### **Music (Tourist Kid)**

Percussion, bells and symbols, atmospheric and arrhythmic, synthesiser noise every few seconds.

### **Ben Rodin**

While Beth's third concussion wasn't football related, it is obvious she wouldn't be facing this predicament without the prior concussions.

To date, there have few, if any studies on the role of concussion within women's community footy, and resources have generally drawn from the policies found in the male game. Australian researchers believe we are about five to ten years away from finding out where we sit in this regard.

With this and experiences like Beth's in mind, commentators like Hayes believe that given the dearth of academic research about concussion there is a role for the AFL to play in helping to understand the challenges that are faced.

### **Nicole Hayes**

It's just about the research. It's gathering that data and actively engaging research experts to – and medical experts – to find what the connection is, to look at how what kind of impact causes concussion, what/how best to minimise it, what damage, if there are different degrees in damage depending on age, depending on, you know, build.

There's just so much we don't know and so much of what we need to do, they need to start now, and we might not know for years.

### **Ben Rodin**

For Beth's part, while she thinks there's room for more education when starting out, pointing to her first concussion as an example, she also believes it's important that women new to the game are empowered to feel confidence and progress in their skill development on the football field. This is pertinent, given women have fought for the right to play from as early as 1897, and this progress is a part of the game's history.

### **Beth Winkler**

In that instance, in that drill, potentially we weren't ready for that kind of drill and it needed to be broken down a little bit more, but at the same time there's probably been times when it's felt like, "Okay let's go back to basics because you guys don't know anything," and then that's also frustrating on a different front, so it's really a fine line between adjusting to this different group playing football and getting that balance between, "Alright, we need to learn the basics but we do want to be progressing.

### **Ben Rodin**

Thinking about these structural issues, I often wonder, like, just what does the AFL think about it all this?

### **Music (Tourist Kid) (Slow Fade In) (Exit Theme)**

Piano melody anchored, with intervening bursts of digital noise and feedback. Small amount of reverb and echo. Feeling and mood is melancholic but again, slightly ambivalent – it isn't telling you how to feel.

### **Ben Rodin**

What does their concussion policy look like? How do they deal with the problem of concussion, across the all types of community football?

In the next and final episode, we head to AFL House, and reflect on what we actually know about all of this.

This is Unsociable Game – a podcast about community footy and concussion. I'm Ben Rodin, and thanks for listening.

### **Music (Tourist Kid)**

Music fade up and then out gradually.