

Unsociable Game – Episode 03 – “To Play or Not to Play”

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

Over the past two episodes, we’ve learnt about head knocks, what they’re like, and what happens, as Will Stubbings and Sam Fleming have told us, when the symptoms stick around a bit longer than we’d like.

But what do we do when these injuries mean you aren’t able to return to the sporting field, and if you do, things might have to change. As Will says, sometimes the biggest perspective shift comes from the friends and family that you have outside the game.

Will Stubbings

Once you’ve had a concussion, and you’ve had a black eye, or a couple of black eyes in a year, your family, your wife, (laughs), and your mother, start going to you what are you doing? Why are you doing this to yourself?

Ben Rodin

The second concussion and amount of recovery time drew a line in the sand for Will.

Will Stubbings

So to appease them a little bit, you go, “Well okay, I’ll finish this season, and I’ll wear a helmet,” and they go, “Yeah great, that’s a good compromise,” or at least an acceptable compromise.

But yeah, it does make you wonder as well, like what are you doing this for? Is this really worth it? Is this going to come back forty years down the track and you’re going to forget your name because you got too many hits in the head when you were young.

Ben Rodin

Sam Fleming’s parents and partner were there on the day of his final hit, which led to long conversations reflecting on the consequences of playing on.

Sam Fleming

They were more worried for my welfare and just how I was feeling immediately after. That was a really tough one because they were there and saw it.

I had a good conversation with my girlfriend, who, she was quite upset, as you can understand, and my mum was quite upset, and Dad’s obviously been my biggest supporter in footy and we’ve shared a really strong bond through footy and when he sort of said, “Look, I think you probably need to think about whether you should do this

anymore,” I thought, “Well that’s, that’s more serious, that’s legitimate.”

Because I’ve always thought I should give it up but I’ve never really considered it and that was probably a moment where, with mum watching, and you know, my girlfriend watching, and then Dad and I having a fairly frank discussion about it, and at no time them telling me what to do, but them saying, this is sort of, me realising that it’s sort of effecting people outside of just me.

Ben Rodin

There is enough worry about the long-term damage from concussion and other links to Alzheimer’s and dementia, that players, including myself, now have to think more stringently about the long term impacts on our health.

To this end, Professor John Olver, our expert from the past two episodes, says medical recommendation to stop playing isn’t done lightly and comes after a long series of tests.

Professor John Olver

When patients have multiple concussions we often do full neuro-psychological assessments, which is assessments of thinking functions, so things like memory, concentration, speed of thinking, planning, problem solving and if we see some sort of permanent reduction in those functions compared to their estimates of pre-morbid ability that’s the sort of time when you’d say, “Well, you really need to consider whether you want to keep on putting yourself at this sort of risk.”

Music (Tourist Kid) (Slow Fade In)

Long mournful, warm sounding synthesisers drone fade in and run a repetitive motif.

Ben Rodin

I underwent an abridged, thirty to forty minute version of the assessment Doctor Olver described after my symptoms took longer than expected to resolve.

I just wanted the decision out of my hands; I knew I wanted to play regardless, but if someone who knew what they were talking about told me to stop, that was okay. I was ready to hear that.

We talked about my medical history, we ran some tests. He asked me to say as many words beginning in “f” for 60 seconds. I made some aah noises, I blinked, I did some other memory and word games.

On the whole, I was average and nowhere near my best. I could only think of 10 words beginning with ‘f’, 11 if you counted ‘fuck’. The doctor said, this isn’t good enough, and as a thirds level footballer, I had nothing to gain by risking a future career.

This would resolve, but playing risked other alternatives. I told the boys at the pub afterwards. Dressed in Mad Monday costumes, they insisted I get a second opinion, but that seemed counter-intuitive, to me at least.

Music (Tourist Kid)

(Slow fade out of the previous motif)

Ben Rodin

As Sam says though, the realisation you have to stop isn't as always as significant as it first seems.

Sam Fleming

For me, it's not a milestone moment or a life-altering moment, you know, footy was awesome, and I really enjoyed it; I've made some amazing lifelong friends through it and because of it.

I'd love to stay involved in footy in some capacity, but you know, it's just my number's up in terms of wanting to do this, so I think I'll put the coaches hat on and just judge people from the sidelines, rather than scream at them when I'm on the field.

Ben Rodin

While Sam has jumped into learning from the senior coaches, I've taken on umpiring, and I must admit, it's a struggle to objectively umpire a game while watching the guys you played with nine months ago, win, or even worse, lose by one hundred points.

Professor Olver says that locating this post-playing interest is important, especially if that competitiveness has been a big part of your life.

John Olver

If Football's been an important part of not only their physical activity but also their social activities have all been involved in the football club, and to leave that and go to nothing is when you get the depression and people sort of falling in a bit of a heap.

So if you've got a medical illness that suddenly brings to a halt your career then you've got to face it because you don't really have much of a choice.

Ben Rodin

With this in mind, if Sam seems fairly comfortable with his decision, and I'm getting used to it, as much as it frustrates me, Will is a bit more circumspect.

Will Stubbings

Part of me still wants to play that odd game, like I said, in the middle of Winter, when all the uni students go back to wherever they come from, and they're short twenty blokes. I'd still like to play that odd game, and just, you know, maybe take it a little bit easier. But it will end up like that at all because I'll always be running through the middle.

Ben Rodin

Additionally, as Sam considers a premiership won previously with another local club, he notes a more terrifying prospect, one I often wonder about myself.

Sam Fleming

Had I not been a part of that premiership team, I reckon I, no matter how many concussions I had, I'd still be playing. I reckon that's a big carrot.

Yeah, it'd be scary to think how many times I'd be happy to get my head knocked around had I not won a premiership.

Ben Rodin

While players like Sam, Will and myself may not find out the true consequences of our involvement in the game for decades, there's a newer generation of players who are negotiating the game's inherent risks.

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

Next week, we look at how women's community footy is reckoning with concussion and the existing gaps in medical research for current players.

This is Unsociable Game, I'm Ben Rodin and thanks for listening.

Music (Tourist Kid)

Music fade up and then out gradually.