



FITZY WANTS YOU

The Recruit host Ryan “Fitzzy” Fitzgerald is looking for a few good men to compete for AFL glory – and earn a footy career in the process

THE RECRUIT Wednesdays from 16 July at 7:30pm on **FOX8** [108]  **HD**

AFL is one of the hardest sports there is.

Players have to be physically strong, quick, on the ball and able to work as a team. They run tens of kilometres over the course of a game, face huge opponents and live in the spotlight. *The Recruit* headhunts the best potential players in the land, giving them a shot at an AFL contract. Radio host, former Sydney Swans player and *Big Brother* star Ryan “Fitzzy” Fitzgerald took a break from yelling at the boys to lift their game to run us through it.

WHAT'S YOUR BACKGROUND IN AFL?

I grew up in Adelaide and played for Port Noarlunga. I went from winning a premiership there to playing for South Adelaide in the SANFL. A year later, I got drafted to the Sydney Swans. I had quite a few injuries – two shoulder reconstructions, three knee reconstructions, two groin operations – but got to play AFL, which was a dream of mine. In 2000, against St Kilda, I kicked five goals on debut. My career went downhill from there! ▶

I ended up playing 18 games, and met some amazing people who are still good mates. After that, I went back to Adelaide and tried to play for South Adelaide again but unfortunately injuries ruined my career. By the age of 26, I'd retired.

WHO DO YOU BARRACK FOR NOW?

I'm an Adelaide boy – a Crows man through and through. I'm an ambassador for the club and I love them to death. I was there for the 1997 and '98 Grand Final wins.

RECKON THEY'LL GET UP THIS YEAR?

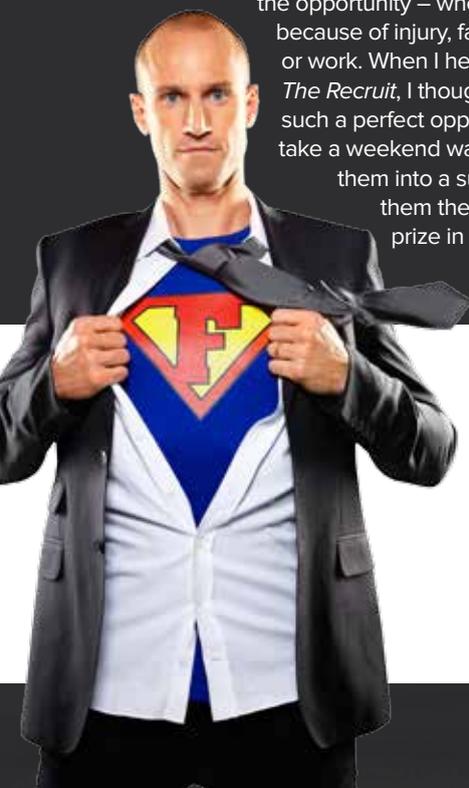
Not with the way they're going at the moment. I'm always optimistic, and we've got some great players, but unfortunately we've had some injuries. I'm not holding my breath.

WHY DO YOU LOVE AFL SO MUCH?

You can't beat the excitement of the game. It's got everything. It's got pace, the skills are incredible, it's hard, it's exciting, there are big marks and lots of scoring. The atmosphere is just unbelievable with the crowds we get. It really is the greatest game in the world.

HOW DID YOU GET INVOLVED WITH THE RECRUIT?

I was approached when they were assembling a team for the show. Anyone who's played sport for a suburban team knows someone who's got the raw talent to become a professional sportsman but have never had the opportunity – whether it's because of injury, family reasons or work. When I heard about *The Recruit*, I thought it was such a perfect opportunity to take a weekend warrior and turn them into a superstar. Give them the greatest prize in Australian



Vossy, Fitzy and the guys put the jokes aside come game time

sport. It's very exciting that one of these boys will be playing for an AFL club next year.

TELL US HOW THE SHOW WORKS.

We had thousands of registrations, so we had to whittle it down to our 12 finalists, who are living in the house and vying to be *The Recruit*. Every week, the boys are given a challenge – that taxes them mentally as well as physically. The winner every week gets special powers and privileges. There's also the opportunity to rate their mates. Guys are getting emotional when they talk about what they think about their teammates. We want honesty out of these boys, we want leadership out of them and we want to see the guy who's prepared to do that one per cent more. It's been really interesting to see what they're willing to do.

AND THE WINNER GETS TO JOIN A CLUB?

That's the best bit. They'll be given a guaranteed AFL contract. The prize is unbelievable – it's never been done before.

WERE THE CLUBS KEEN FROM DAY ONE?

Everyone was really positive about it. The AFL have been so supportive and love the idea. Every club is going to be represented at the grand final show. There are recruiters out there trying to find the next superstar every single week. We've got some really good footballers and some amazing stories that are going to blow the clubs away.

DO YOU INTERACT WITH THE BOYS MUCH?

Quite a bit. I'm there every week, setting up challenges. They live in a house together so I'm always going round to see how they're doing. They cook me dinner sometimes. Unfortunately they also see me at bad times, so they always get nervous because I'm there when it's delisting time. They know that when Fitzy's rocking up, someone has to go.

SO IT'S A LOVE/HATE SCENARIO...

I have a great relationship with the boys. The reason I'm so passionate about the show is that my background is exactly the same as

FITZY: HOW TO BE A SPORTING HERO

• HONESTY

"I see a lot of raw talent. If these guys knuckled down, they could be amazing, but some of them don't take it seriously."

• HARD WORK

"If you want it, you've got to sacrifice."

• PERSISTENCE

"Watch *The Recruit* to see the lengths you have to go to in order to be a professional AFL footballer. You can't be half-hearted about it. It's all or nothing in this game – in any high-level sport, actually."

• PERSEVERANCE

"Always go that little bit further."

• TRUST

"You'll learn so much from guys like Michael Voss, Ben Dixon and Darren Burgess, so watch carefully."



“YOU HAVE TO DO THE LITTLE BITS TO BE BETTER THAN ANYONE ELSE”

theirs. I was 20 when I got drafted. I came from a country background and I was working at Mitsubishi making seats. So I know where they've come from and what's ahead.

DO YOU GET OUT THE BOOTS?

I've had a couple of kicks with the boys. They tried to get me to play a game, but I could see they were stitching me up. There's a lot of raw talent in there. I'd end up on the ground.

AND THEY KNOW ABOUT YOUR INJURIES.

They'd target them! I'm a 37-year-old man living in a 50-year-old body at the moment.

DO YOU GIVE THEM ANY ADVICE?

I do. The boys have confided in me about where they've come from. I make it clear that this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. It opens the gateway to the greatest life you can have – playing professional football. That's the best thing about *The Recruit* – they've got the best facilities to take them to the next level. So I tell them to embrace that. Do everything they can to win this competition and fulfil their dream.

AND THERE'S A GREAT COACHING STAFF.

One of the best coaches and arguably the best footballer of all time in Michael Voss, Darren Burgess as high-performance coach, Leigh Russell getting into the mental side of things and Ben Dixon, who played for Hawthorn.

ACCESS TO VOSSY ALONE WOULD MAKE YOU LIFT YOUR GAME, WOULDN'T IT?

Mark Ricciuto played for the Crows, won a Brownlow and is regarded just as highly as Michael Voss. When he was playing, Mark had a bedroom mirror, and written on it was, "What would Michael Voss be doing?" Just to push himself that bit extra. That's the stuff I try to teach younger guys. Even the guys at their peak are pushing themselves. Those little things will make you the great footballer you can be.



WHAT ABOUT REALITY TV ADVICE?

A couple of boys have been mucking around and having a bit of a laugh. I said, "That's fine if you want to do that. My advice, if you're not going to work hard, is to go on *Big Brother*." Don't take that as a knock – it worked for me!

FINALLY, HOW COME YOU CHANGED YOUR NAME FROM FRYZIE TO FITZY?

Just before I went into the *Big Brother* house, my mates for some reason started calling me Fryan Ritzgerald, which became Fryzie, and it stuck in the house. When I came out, I didn't realise it had taken off. Then I went onto radio and tried to take it back to Fitzy, but there's still a lot of people out there who call me Fryzie. ▶



ON-SET EXCLUSIVE



BEHIND THE SCENES ON *THE RECRUIT*

From the field to the War Room, this is how the players make their mark

If the recruits are nervous about playing their heroes in an all-star battle, they're not showing it as we arrive at Melbourne's Etihad Stadium to explore the inner workings of *The Recruit*.

The boys stretch, practise passing and go crazy with the Dencorub while the captain for this challenge – elected after winning the previous week's trial – serves up some words of encouragement. You wouldn't think the amateurs were about to go up against a team of retired legends led by Shane Warne.

FIELD OF DREAMS

The Recruit initially gathers around 50 hopefuls, all eager for a professional AFL career. The first episode whittles that group down to 12, and each subsequent instalment reduces that number through delistings – the footy equivalent of an eviction.

Every episode, after seeing how the boys handle that week's challenge – be it playing against the legends or running through Melbourne lugging a block of cement that's meant to represent their fears – the coaches gather in the War Room to discuss and assess. Brisbane legend Michael Voss is *The Recruit*'s head coach, and he makes the final decision on who is shown the door. But unlike a lot of reality shows, Vossy and crew pull no punches.

"We've had guys who have worked really hard, but they're not going to make it," he says.



"They're the hardest ones to delist. You're not saying they haven't got the character or application, but you have to look at it based on the others in the competition. If I have to compare the skill level, they're just not gonna be up for it."

Vossy's assistant coach Ben Dixon agrees. "If you don't give it to them between the eyes, you're not doing it justice," says the former Hawthorn player. "I love being brutal with them – that's the AFL system. If I sit here and put sugar on it, I might as well be a tennis coach. Dreams get shattered every day, so if that happens – in all honesty, it's not for you."

HONEST APPRAISALS

In addition to copping it from the coaches, the boys have to give open feedback on each other in the Locker Room. Pointing out weakness in teammates can be confronting.

"It's hard because you become mates, but you've got to realise you're competing against

each other," says one contestant from South Australia. "Sometimes you've got to give feedback and you're worried about whether they're going to vote for you to be delisted."

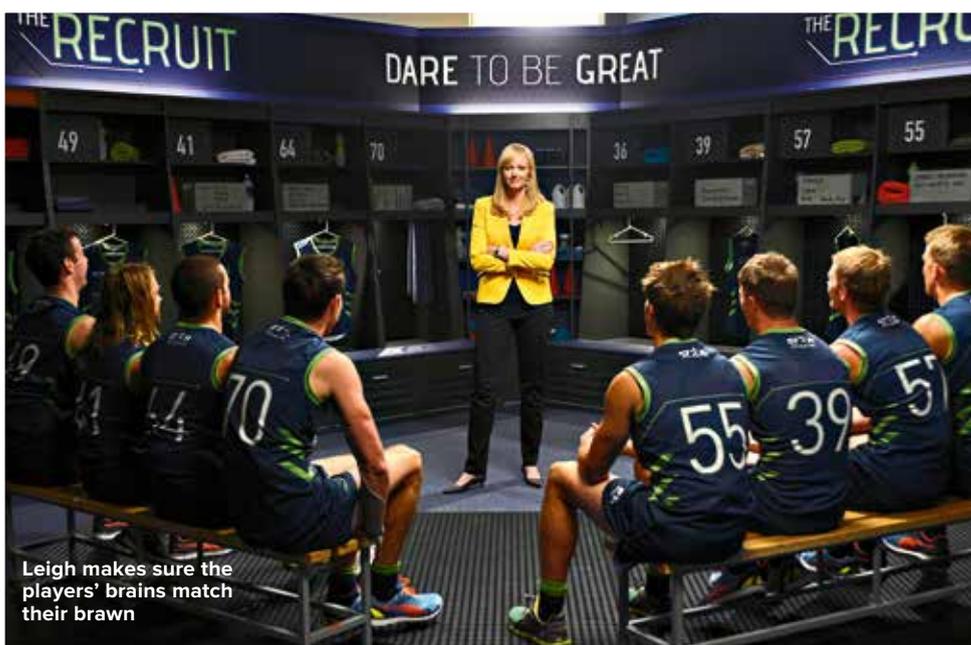
A Victorian competitor adds, "It's intense. Initially, you can get angry, but then you think, 'These people are pointing out what I need to do to improve. I should take it on board.'"

THE COACH IS CLEAR

Elite performance manager Leigh Russell has worked with professional sporting teams for years. She leads the often-heated Locker Room sessions.

"What they get from me is a concentrated mindset about working with the most powerful muscle in their body – the brain," she explains. "I'm concerned with creating leadership and maximising everything you have in your power. Initially, it was such a remarkable step for them to be in a high-performance environment that they didn't know what to do. They thought

Despite the location, these coaches aren't about grandstanding



Leigh makes sure the players' brains match their brawn

I was trying to pit them against each other, rather than taking the more mature view of, 'OK, this is good for our development.'"

In terms of that development, the resources poured into these boys are incredible. High-performance coach Darren Burgess, who works for Port Adelaide, flies into Melbourne every week to put them through their paces.

"For me, the most challenging part has been trying to take these guys from an amateur way of thinking about their profession," he says. "We've had instances where guys have been eating chocolate before a game because they think that you need sugar to play. Guys who are having large amounts of energy drinks pre-game because they think caffeine is good. It's just trying to change their perception of what's elite."

Getting to that point is a crucible of pain, but the prize for ultimate victory is worth it, claims another potential recruit. "I've always fantasised about playing AFL," he admits. "This show provides the opportunity for it to be a reality. I've put my business on the line, so to come out with the prize would be the best."

Back at Etihad, the umpire launches the first bounce and the boys are a team of individuals – working together against Warnie's crew, but looking to stand out. They're definitely going to have words in the Locker Room tomorrow... **F**

THE RECRUIT

Wednesdays from 16 July at 7.30pm on

FOX8 [108]

Encore screenings on Wednesdays from 23 July at 5.30pm on **FOX FOOTY** [504]

WHAT MAKES A RECRUIT?

MICHAEL VOSS HEAD COACH

"The biggest thing in any sport is that people can articulate what needs to be done, but not everybody can do it. There's a real discipline to be able to execute what you need to do. You need to be consistent in approach to get the best out of yourself."



BEN DIXON ASSISTANT COACH

"I look for AFL quality. Have they got what it takes? Not just in skill, they've got to have application and an understanding of the game. There are so many variables that come with AFL, and we've got to try to capture that in eight weeks."



DARREN BURGESS HIGH-PERFORMANCE COACH

"Eagerness to learn. They want to know what does Travis Boak do, what does Robbie Gray do? How do they get so fit? It's a blank canvas with these guys – they don't know any other way."



LEIGH RUSSELL ELITE PERFORMANCE MANAGER

"I'm looking for leadership. My success factor is not just getting them onto an AFL list, but keeping them on a list. I want to look back in five years and be proud of the career that started on *The Recruit*."



THE RECRUIT TOP 12 PLAYER

"It's a combination of all the little things. Everything you do on and off the field. The way you conduct yourself, are you marketable, can you play? And if you give the coaches any doubts, that's going to put you at a major disadvantage."

