

Whole community ready to listen

Birregurra footballer Jady Halik shares his darkest days and the club's compassion and powerful response, encouraging people to talk.

BY JACOB TRAYNOR

"I'm really sorry, Pete, I won't be able to play this weekend. This morning, I tried to take my own life."

For Birregurra footballer Jady Halik, it was a text sent out of his darkest days.

Now, the 26-year-old wants to make sure nobody ever has to send one like it again.

Jady spoke to the *Colac Herald* about his low point, and how his football club wrapped around him in the aftermath — and why he now breathes red, white and black.

Jady came to the club as an unknown, having moved down from the Gold Coast to the Geelong region; he'd picked up a new job and was kicking goals professionally.

"I thought I was headed on the right track, but I didn't have my personal life in order whatsoever," Jady said.

"I was in a poor mental state, I was hurting other people - good people - and when it all came to a point at one time, the guilt and everything else just reached this climax: I felt it would have been better for me 'to not be' and I tried to take my life."

Understandably, Jady's footy took a pause. But when he returned, what he found surprised him; a whole community ready to listen—starting with the 20 blokes he ran onto the field with.

"Birre had already done a hell of a lot to make me feel comfortable when I arrived. But that first week back on the ground is something that will stay with me.

"For me, it was a getting to speak in the rooms after the game. We'd just had a good win, and I felt I needed to be really open about the mistakes I made leading up to what happened.

"Some of the people I had hurt were directly linked to these guys I played footy with, and I couldn't shy away from what I've done."

But Jady says he didn't encounter judgement after opening up; only compassion.

"The club came forward and said they were sorry for letting things get to a point without noticing; they made a promise never to hold off again.

"When I came back the next season they had this massive banner on the side of the ground encouraging people to talk."

More than that, Birregurra's reserves coach Pete Hanlon reached out to another district club and found a contact specialising in mental health and resilience programs, to roll out support networks in the club.

In response, the Sport and Life Training group hosted a talk at Birregurra: the town packed out the club-rooms, with about 200 people



PHOTO SUPPLIED

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JADYN HALIK

crammed in to show support and learn the next steps for making sure footy-netball clubs were empowered to recognise and know how to support members who needed help.

"We know that people are three more times as connected to their sports clubs than their work or school," SALT's Scott Angove said.

"Country footy in Victoria is so important for that connectedness, and it's such a good way to break down stigmas."

Scott said experts were now promoting wellbeing teams in regional footy clubs — small groups of players and club people who could notice when things were 'a bit off'.

"Someone might not be attending training, they might be a bit angry or drinking too much," he said.

"Wellbeing teams are

trained to notice if people want a bit of help. They can't always provide it themselves, but they're people you can go to."

Wellbeing teams also empower clubs to know how to help when somebody reaches out for support; they know what to do when someone receives a tough text, like Jady's.

Scott said the surveys his team does with footy clubs were always an eye-opener.

"We use a live quiz, players can answer anonymously on their phones, and have the power to speak into what's actually happening at a club," he said.

"On any given day, I can talk statistics to the cows come home — but when I can say, 'this is your club and this is what is going on,' it gives us that permission to have a real conversation."

"We know what courage



TEAM PLAYER: Jady Halik in action for Birregurra.

looks on the footy field — but real courage is also sitting back and reflecting and sharing on things we'd rather keep locked up."

For Jady, that's a message that rings true.

"We found out that quite a few of the boys I play with were going through dark times and no-one really knew about it; was far more common than any of us thought.

"It's through sport and that community that you have the best connections and the best chance to help people.

"In day-to-day life it's much more reserved; once you throw on the uniform,

you're part of the collective."

Jady now works in human resources in a large civil construction firm in Melbourne. He drives down the highway each week to play for Birregurra — a club he says will never leave him.

"I wouldn't want to kick a pill anywhere else, really," he said.

As for his own personal development:

"You can have done some bad things and hurt people, but it's about how you respond," he said.

"It's all about response over reaction — this is my pledge to recover, and be the best version of myself I can be."

South helps lead the way on wellbeing



SUPPORT: Wellbeing team David Pilley and Leanne Klahsen.

Across the district, a Colac-based club is setting the example when it comes to off-field support.

South Colac Sports Club formed an official wellbeing committee and wellbeing strategy in early 2022.

The move built on a wealth of good work already happening in the area, with the club realising it deserved more structure, wellbeing co-ordinator Leanne Klahsen said.

There has been a strong focus on support and education for juniors, as well as boosting skills for coaches and key people with programs like Read the Play, Tackle Your Feelings, SALT and Let's Talk.

South will also continue its annual joint initiative with Simpson to dedicate a game to mental health and wellbeing — hosted at Simpson this

year in round seven.

The club's strategy is backed by the work of Monash Health's Healthy Sports Clubs, and promotes a whole-of-club approach with nine wellbeing and health areas: Inclusion, mental wellness, injury prevention, healthy food and drink, preventing drug harm, physical activity, sun protection, responsible alcohol consumption and vape-and-smoke-free clubs.

This year, the club is prioritising concussion management, vaping and smoking, injury prevention and healthy eating.

"In pre-season they have hosted an all-football and netball player strength and conditioning and sports dietician session focussed on pre and post-match body fuelling," Leanne said.

The club also hosted St Kilda 200-gamer and best-and-fairest Steven Baker last month for a Build GRIT presentation, with the former South Colac star encouraging people to persist and not give up, told through his lived experiences.

The team will formally present its wellbeing Strategy to the wider club in coming weeks, but Leanne said the work was already telling.

"We're really pleased to see the progress made so far and we will continue to have the whole person's wellbeing at the centre of what we do," she said.

It's expected more local clubs will follow suit and establish wellbeing teams in coming years, as research continues to support the link between community sport and whole-of-life health.

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