

FIELD OF DREAMS



Taj Deluca, centre, during a game of Starkick.

「FEATURE」

An acquired brain injury has not stopped eight-year-old Taj Deluca from realising his footy dream, thanks to an all-abilities football program for kids

STORY **GLEN QUARTERMAIN**

Taj Deluca dreams of taking species so high above the ground he can see the sets in the nearby ocean. Of breaking the lines and weaving between opponents. Of crowd-lifting goals on the run.

Of running out on to Optus Stadium or the MCG with mum and dad Danica and Matt, siblings Vinnie and Daisy and nanna Mimsy teary eyed in the stands as he makes his AFL debut.

Taj, like many eight-year-olds, is footy obsessed. He can reel off stats rapid fire. Kicks. Marks. Handballs. Hard ball gets. He digests the lot.

And he's not one-eyed either. Taj counts Geelong, Melbourne and North Melbourne – courtesy of No. 1 draft pick Jason Horne-Francis – as his favourite teams. And that may change again soon.

It was hardly a surprise then when younger brother Vinnie signed up for Auskick, Taj turned to his mum and asked: "When do I start, Mummy?"

It was a question Danica Deluca had been dreading for eight years. Since a cardiac arrest at six months deprived her eldest son of oxygen and left him with an acquired brain injury, quadriplegic cerebral palsy.

But magic does happen. Taj is playing footy. After a pre-season work-out, he makes his debut this month for Coolbinia Bombers Junior Football Club, through the vision and hard work of a footy dad who brought Starkick to life, an all-abilities program that is backed by the West Australian Football Commission and is one of the AFL's big growth areas.

It has sent positive ripples through Taj's family and no doubt, countless others.

Therapy, so important but often monotonous and tiresome, has become pre-season training.

And match day? "We have never seen him that happy," Danica says. »