

# AFL transforms lives

# Look Mum, I can play footy!



Physical handicaps are no barrier to beaming smiles at the Coolbinia Bombers in Perth!



**Archer Johnson**

Mum Lisa says football is the best thing that's happened to little Archer.

Archer is strapped to his mum with a brace, or Upsee.



"Footy is the best thing that's ever happened to him," beams proud mum Lisa Johnson, 38, who is there for every step her son takes on the field – literally.

**Using an imported velcro brace known as an Upsee, the mum-of-three straps herself to her son, who is blind and has cerebral palsy, and they play out the game together.**

Archer is the inaugural team member of the Starkick special needs AFL side at Coolbinia Bombers club in Perth.

When they're out and about at the shops Lisa says people are always staring at Archer. But here he's just one of the team, and no one cares one hoot.

"He might get too heavy for me one day, but at this stage he talks excitedly about it all week. And it's a good workout for both of us!" says Lisa.

### Starkick heroes

Ally-Anne, aka "Superboot", has the longest kick of Archer's teammates, the payoff of hours of practice each week.

"My eyes got sick and they don't work," the AFL-mad seven-year-old tells *Woman's Day*.

But that doesn't slow her down as she takes to the field with two prostheses, the result of surviving cancer at just 20 months.

"I get great joy out of watching

her," says mum Karen from the sideline. A volunteer "navigator" helps Ally-Anne move on the field, and bells on the ball help her home in on the target.

**Welcomed to the team** Jeni Maynard travels 120km to make sure her four-year-old gets his weekly footy fix.

"Christopher has autism spectrum disorder, and this is one of the only places he's welcomed," says Jeni.

The team have also been a huge help in transforming Christopher's behaviour.

Jeni says her boy can have 10 meltdowns an hour off the field, but when he slips on the black and red uniform he's a different person.

"I can't even take him

to the shops because he'll throw himself on the floor and make a scene. But here they understand my child's disability," she says.

Team coach Rob Geersen, 48, whose son contracted meningitis at 13 months, started Starkick

earlier this year after wondering what children with special needs could do for sport and exercise.

"Bradley basically had a stroke and for a time he couldn't even blink," Rob remembers. **As he started to come good, I looked for ways to integrate him with mainstream kids. But I couldn't find a single program.**

"So I started Starkick, and it operates inside and alongside the 380 other Auskick kids at the Coolbinia Bombers."

Now Rob has dozens of kids with special needs signed up, and everyone gets a touch of the ball every week.

So popular is Rob's program that one family will fly 1000km each month from Newman, WA, to ensure their son gets a run with the team.

"Rob's incredible and my son loves him," says Jeni, who faces a long drive every week to get her boy to the games. "It makes getting up at 6am to get here on time very worthwhile."

**'Once he slips on the uniform he's a different person'**



**Christopher Maynard**

Being part of the team has transformed Christopher's behaviour.



**Ally-Anne aka Superboot**

Her practising has paid off – Ally-Anne has the longest kick in the team.



**Ollie van der Meulen**

Ollie, 5, has cerebral palsy. Like the other team members, he loves his time on the field.