

Breaking the cycle

AFL players are helping troubled youngsters turn their lives around. **By Bianca Ousley.**

For many in the community, the work some AFL players do off the field is more important than their exploits on the field, even though that work rarely receives the coverage some of the on-field feats do.

A handful of Victorian-based players are putting their time away from the game to good use, working with community group Whitelion to help disadvantaged young people. Whitelion, based in Melbourne's inner northern suburbs, has had the strong support of the AFL since it was formed seven years ago.

Melbourne's Lynden Dunn, the Kangaroos' Djaran Whyman and Joel Perry, Hawthorn's Ben Kane and Carlton's Eddie Betts are an integral part of Whitelion's sports role model program.

The program sees players and other athletes regularly visit Victoria's juvenile justice centres.

Each footballer is allocated to at least one centre. They aim to establish relationships with the youths in the centres and encourage healthy activities and life choices, leading by example.

The role models build a rapport with, and gain the trust of, the young people by participating in group activities or one-on-one sessions. Building positive relationships allows the players to encourage the youths to make positive decisions, while also challenging them about the poor choices they have made.

"Working with Whitelion is a good way to have an influence on troubled kids. It helps me get away



A BROADER VIEW: Young AFL players including Melbourne's Lynden Dunn (left), Hawthorn's Ben Kane, Djaran Whyman and Joel Perry of the Kangaroos are part of the Whitelion sports role model program.

from footy, which you sometimes need to do," Perry said.

Kane can often be found playing ping-pong or computer games with the boys at Melbourne Juvenile Justice Centre.

"I didn't know what to expect on my first day with Whitelion, but I quickly gelled with several of the boys and soon realised that showing an interest in these kids could prevent them ending up in adult prison," he said.

"Often we judge people on the bad things they have done and abandon them, rather than seeing an opportunity to help repair the damage done."

By the end of this season, Whitelion's sports role model program will have impacted the lives of most of the young people in custody in Victoria. About 40-50 of these young people will have developed a one-on-one relationship with a role model.

Whitelion supports disadvantaged young people. It

aims to make the community a more inclusive and safer place. Each year thousands of young people are disconnected from their families and the community because of abuse, neglect, drug addiction and poverty.

These young people have often had horrific life experiences with few positive role models and are caught in a 'cycle of discouragement'. Many end up in out-of-home care or the juvenile justice system.

Whitelion, founded in 1999

by Mark Watt (CEO) and former Essendon and Carlton defender Glenn Manton (president), gives them the best chance to break the cycle, through positive role modelling, mentoring and employment. "Sports role models must have an ability to listen and react. The community needs more role models and Whitelion is proud to contribute to the cause," Manton said. ■

• Bianca Ousley is communications manager for Whitelion.

Finals lunch

As a non-profit organisation, Whitelion's programs operate via financial contributions from grants, donations and fundraising activities, including an annual AFL final series luncheon.

This year's function will be held on Tuesday, September 5, in the MCC dining room at the MCG, with guests including AFL CEO Andrew Demetriou, AFLPA CEO Brendon Gale, Melbourne vice-chairman Beverley O'Connor, Essendon captain Matthew Lloyd, Western Bulldogs coach Rodney Eade and *Herald Sun* football expert Mike Sheahan. For more details, phone Whitelion on (03) 9389 4420 or visit whitelion.org.au.