

THE FIRST glimpse the wider world got of Marlion Pickett was not on an Australian rules football field in Melbourne. He was neither bathed in sunshine doing a balletic blind turn in front of 100,014 spectators, nor buried by his Richmond Football Club teammates after a cool, calm but dramatic (almost cinematic) grand final goal. He was not wearing yellow and black. He was not 27 years old.

He was 20. He was 60 kilometres east of Perth. And he was behind bars.

Pickett was a character - identified only as "Marlion" - in a five-part 2014 TV documentary called *Outside Chance*, about an innovative 2012 criminal justice program, in which inmates of the minimum-security Wooroloo Prison Farm were allowed to play football matches against local teams in a regional league, outside their razor-wire confines. The aim was best summed up by the tagline of the series: "Winning their redemption, one game at a time."

I watched the ABC show before I met Pickett in person, and it's confronting. It opens with vision of inmates being strip-searched and foreboding iron doors slamming shut. It's narrated by Andrew Krakouer, the former Richmond forward who went to jail for assault in 2008, before being released from prison, then returning to play in the AFL with Collingwood. A sentence from his opening monologue stands out: "One player, Marlion, looks like he has the goods to emulate my journey, and potentially make it big on the outside."

Game footage comes next, and Pickett is instantly recognisable. That languid stride and loping gait. The way his slender arms cradle the ball and place it gently on the foot. Next, in a single snippet of vision, comes a breathtaking confirmation of his football identity. Call it the Pickett pirouette. The sweeping, circular, slow-motion spin is an exact replica of the old-fashioned evasive dance he did on the MCG against the GWS Giants that last Saturday in September, on his way to gathering 22 clean disposals and one premierships medallion, not to mention a place in sporting folklore as the first player in almost seven decades to make his AFL debut on grand final day.

The series doesn't detail his crimes, nor does Pickett talk about them on camera, but he was sent away for 30 months following a string of burglaries in the Perth suburbs, where he spent his late teens. "I stuffed up in the past.

Probably boredom," he says on the doco, sheepish but honest. "Alcohol. Being brought up around drugs. Everything goes downhill from there. Guess you've got nothing to look forward to, so you start committing crimes, then from crime, you end up in here."

The other players - with shaved skulls and rat's tails and hollow eyes - spend much of their time stressing about making parole. On the field, they get sucked in when opponents taunt them as jailbirds and crims. Pickett, though, seems mostly immune from these pressures, launching endless scything runs, flicking nonchalant passes across his body, and flying for marks like a feather in the wind. In one scene, the players and coaches anonymously rate one another and Pickett finishes on top, with 89 of a possible 90 votes. He talks tenderly about his hopes, too, but with little belief in his voice.

"Hopefully I'll make it to the AFL," he says, eyes drifting down, glancing away. "That's mainly my dream since I was a kid. Hopefully it comes true."

The Wooroloo team plays well, sweeping all before them. The players enjoy the program, too. They eat junk food from club canteens. They visit their families on the sidelines. It's an unprecedented level of freedom. One inmate calls it a torment - "Temptation Island" - and so it proves.

Late one night at Wooroloo, a player is discovered outside his cell. The prison officers toss his room and uncover contraband. A little marijuana. The player is immediately transferred to the medium-security Acacia Prison. His privileges are gone. No more footy. "The real tragedy is that he's the player with the most to lose," says Krakouer. "Marlion."

The jail goes quiet. The program is suspended. The documentary is cut short. In the last episode, Pickett fronts a camera. "I got caught with some shit over there. I got charged for it. Stuffed the whole team around I guess," he says, shifting and upset. "I coulda done better, yeah. But you make mistakes in life."

SEVEN YEARS later, Pickett meets me in the players' lounge at the Richmond Football Club, where we sit on curved couches by a fridge and fruit baskets and computer game consoles, chatting about life and mistakes. Pickett doesn't make many mistakes in footy. That started when he was six. He was the right age for AFL Auskick, but was nudged instead by his father to join his big brother in the under-nines.

That was in Balga, a suburb of Perth, but the family - four boys and three girls - moved soon to Manjimup, 300 kilometres south of the capital, inland from Margaret River. It was all wheat and sheep there once, now it's truffles and wine. They moved more than once through his formative years, to Midland and York and Lakeside, and he played football wherever



Marlion Pickett during his debut AFL game - also known as the 2019 AFL grand final. It was a long way from his time playing for a prison footy team in Perth.

## MARLION'S CHANCE

It's quite the tale: Marlion Pickett, a young bloke from Perth, makes his AFL debut in this year's grand final, wowing the crowd with his raw talent. His backstory is even more remarkable.

BY *Konrad Marshall*



they went. His brothers played the game, too, but Marlion was the standout talent of the family. At one point in his late teens, footy was an everyday affair: training in the afternoons on Monday through Friday, then playing for the Perth suburbs of Koongamia on Saturdays and Nollamara on Sundays.

School was never his strong suit. Pickett was what you might call a disengaged youth. Whenever a season ended he started drinking, and doing drugs, although he doesn't say what. He found himself in fights. He broke into homes, and sold what he stole from within. "I had my first son when I was 18, Marlion junior. I was with him for nine months. I didn't know, but my missus was pregnant at the time with my second, Latrell," he says. "That's when the police came."

Pickett was arrested in 2010, and his time at Woorooloo began in early 2011. He had met Jessica Nannup when he was 15, and she stayed with him through the custodial sentence that came his way. His crimes weren't violent, and Pickett owns his actions, but there are also mitigating factors to consider.

"There's context to this that's important," says Aaron Clark, director of the Korin Gamadji Institute, an Indigenous education and leadership centre attached to the Tigers. "In places like where Marlion is from, there are quirky mandatory sentencing laws that send people to jail for minor crimes. There are women going to jail for unpaid parking tickets. There's inter-generational trauma, juvenile detention problems, deaths in custody. It's important to think about these things when you're unpicking the story of Marlion and his incarceration, and his vulnerability, and the thousands like him. We need to dig a little deeper, beyond the tale of a kid who did bad then turned good."

Pickett echoes the sentiments of some of the players from *Outside Chance* in noting that the best part of the prison footy program was also the hardest: when your child comes to see you play, and then it's time to go. "I'd walk off the ground, give them a hug and a kiss, and then there was no looking back, and they start crying," he tells me. "It got so hard at one point that I didn't really want visits. I told them to come every four months. Make it easier on everyone."

Getting shifted to medium security, he says, became a blessing. In the minimum-security environment he had too much time, too little structure. In Acacia Prison he was surrounded by more serious offenders. His older brother was there, too, and a handful of uncles, some of them fighting drug addiction. "Seeing them in that state made me want to change," he says, sipping a bottle of water in this cushy space where the players come to relax. "I didn't want to be in and out of there, like that. I wanted to change for the better, for my kids, and keep the dream alive. Hard times, but I think leaving the kids and the missus helped me understand what I could be losing."

With 12 months left to run on his sentence, he watched an awful lot of AFL matches, and those of the lower-level state league, the WAFL. He quit drinking, and hasn't had a drop of alcohol in seven years. "I made my mind up: 'When I get out, everything is about footy and family.' The first week I got out of prison, I walked straight into South Fremantle Football Club."

That was 2012. The South Fremantle Bulldogs are a proud club, with strong historic ties to Richmond. Champion centremen Maurice Rioli was a star there before and after his playing career with the Tigers. Krakouer was recruited from there, too. There are many more but one among them stands out: Mal Brown, the former Richmond powerbroker (or at least provocateur), who played and coached at South Freo. Brown played a pivotal role in the rise of Indigenous footballers from Western Australia.

**H**AVE YOU heard of the Noongar nation? It is the largest language group or clan near Perth, perhaps in the country. If you follow football you'll recognise the names of the nation. Hill and Yarran. Garlett and Narkle. The Jetta cousins. The Ah Chee brothers. Harley Bennell and Michael Walters are Noongar. Paddy Ryder and Lance "Buddy" Franklin, too. Before them came Peter Matera and Jeff Farmer, Nicky Winmar and Derek Kickett – not to mention Jimmy and Phil Krakouer. Or Barry Cable. Or the late great Graham "Polly" Farmer. Marlion Pickett is Noongar, too.

While most Indigenous language groups have a few players in the AFL at any given time, the Noongar routinely has more than two dozen – a full third of all Indigenous players in the league. Legendary AFL coach Kevin Sheedy called them "the Zulus of this nation". I once spoke in a Fremantle cafe to the documentary maker Paul Roberts, who made a film about the Noongar called *Black Magic*, and he put it best. "It is a story of *spectacular* over-representation. An astonishing anomaly."

In the late 1970s, most WAFL clubs had only one or two Indigenous players, but Brown fielded as many as eight a side. He loved their flair and instinct, but something else Brown said rings true with Marlion Pickett's recruitment to Richmond. Brown recruited Noongars not just for their unfathomable manoeuvres but because they'd steeled themselves in hardened leagues, often in the country where big boys pour milk on Mallee roots for breakfast. "They had played against men. They knew how to cop a whack," Brown says. "You get a bloke who's physically stronger and quicker ... and his mates become the people at the club." He could be talking about Pickett.

I chat about this with Pickett's manager, Anthony Van Der Wielen, inside the boardroom at Richmond's Punt Road Oval, one day before the grand final. Van Der Wielen is a director at South Fremantle but has been helping promote Noongar players like Pickett for 15 years. He also represents star midfielder Tim Kelly, who was a Noongar teammate of Pickett at South Fremantle, until he was taken by Geelong in the 2017 draft. He remembers when Pickett walked into South Fremantle.

"Marlion never shies away from what he did," he says, watching the Tigers train. "It was a string of things – not a one-off mistake – so it was probably a matter of time before he went away. But it might have been a blessing. He needed something to slap him into line and give him that wake-up call. Then he rehabilitated himself."

Once Pickett did that, his seven WAFL seasons yielded 98 senior games and two best and fairest awards. He became a gliding, leaping mix of outer grace and inner brutality. "Everyone was shit-scared of Marlion Pickett when he played

WAFL, mate," says Van Der Wielen, laughing. "No one wanted to go near him. Physically he would dominate you, and then he'd rip you apart with skill, too."

Matt Clarke, Richmond's national recruiting manager, was paying attention, but WAFL games can be an unreliable gauge of ability, in part because they play on such wide grounds, without the same congestion or contact as in the AFL. Pickett was also positioned across half-back and on the wing, until Tim Kelly left for Geelong. Pickett took his spot in the middle, and went from gazelle to bull. "You could see the AFL traits," says Clarke. "He'd hit bodies. He's actually a natural collision player."

The Tigers also liked that he had shown loyalty to South Fremantle – and faith in himself – by staying and playing WAFL footy, within view of AFL scouts, instead of joining a cashed-up country footy club. "He could have earned much more money playing in the bush," says Will Thursfield, a former tall defender at Richmond who is now a recruiting officer for the club. "But year after year Marlion kept fronting up for the Bulldogs, which is a big tick for his character."

Overlooked in five successive AFL drafts, his resolve was tested. Pickett says it only made him "hungrier" for his chance. "I know clubs doubted me," he says, pausing, "because of my past," pausing again, "and my criminal record," he says, stopping a moment. "I just wished they would judge me on my footy." But AFL clubs are notoriously risk-averse, and seemingly none wanted to gamble on his talent. Tim Kelly had been a revelation when selected as a 23-year-old, but Pickett would turn 27 coming into 2019. Being drafted so old is incredibly rare. "Tim got in much younger," Van Der Wielen says, "and I think Marlion saw that and probably thought his dream had gone."

PICKETT KEPT working but ripped the tendons in his right-hand index finger at the beginning of this year. An AFL mid-season draft was announced – the first one in 26 years – but Pickett couldn't prove himself while on the sidelines injured. He took a calculated risk, returning to the field shortly before that mid-season draft, to show what he could do. A few minutes into his second game back, the finger broke again.

It was just four days before the draft, so Van Der Wielen leapt into action, reaching out to one of the best hand and wrist microsurgeons in Perth, Dr Jeff Ecker, before the game had even finished. Ecker was in theatre that Saturday and agreed to operate that night.

Pickett was sent to a private hospital. South Freo picked up the tab. The surgery was successful and produced timely medical reports for any curious AFL clubs to consider. All of this was critical to the fairy-tale story that unfolded later.

Recovering at home with a finger full of stitches, strapped to a splint, swaddled in bandages, Pickett held no hope. "I thought my dreams were busted again," he says. "I didn't expect to get drafted." He watched the draft unfold hoping only that his friend, the 22-year-old East Perth ruckman Ajang Ajang, might be selected by a team with diminished tall stocks. "Came to the 13th pick, and my name was called out," Pickett says, smiling slightly. He was the third-last player chosen, and the Tigers' only selection. "I stood up, started scratching my head."

Richmond flew him east almost immediately, and dropped him off at the Port Melbourne home of Tigers superstar Dustin Martin, who had offered his spare room. Martin told Pickett he could stay

as long as he needed, but Pickett wanted to be enscenced in a home with parents and children, so he moved out after a fortnight, to live with the host family ("Sue and Vin") of young Indigenous half-back Derek Eggmolese-Smith. "They were really supportive and really caring. I felt at home."

He seemed to take the entire upheaval in his stride, having what people around him describe as an unflappable personality. "He's affable, low-maintenance, unflustered, self-sufficient," says Matt Clarke. "He's actually a pretty adventurous character, too. I remember in his first week asking him what he was going to do on his day off, and he said, 'I'm just gonna get on the trams and go and see Melbourne. Where do you reckon I should go?' I told him St Kilda and asked if he wanted directions: 'Nah, nah, I'll figure it out,' he said. He just wanted to take in his surroundings."

**H**E SETTLED into the club quickly, just as his family appear to have now, on the Friday morning before the grand final. Inside the club offices at Punt Road Oval, I see Jess and their four children, Marlion jnr, 9, Latrell, 7, Shaniquae, 4, and Levi, 2, and they're all wearing brand new guernseys with their father's number – 50 – on the back. They're climbing on couches and a table, and tossing little plastic balls at a game called Connect 4 Shots.

"What's all this?" asks Richmond's All Australian defender Dylan Grimes, as he wanders past. "Little Marlions running around everywhere."

"Look at these Picketts, will ya," says Tigers coach Damien Hardwick, coming out of his office. "You guys excited? Yeah, me, too."

"Uncle!" they yell as young cult hero (and fellow Noongar) Sydney Stack enters the room. "Hi Uncle!" One by one Stack picks them up for cuddles.

Off to the side in his office is VFL coach Craig McRae: the first at the club to get a close look at Pickett's talents in the yellow and black, in a handful of key games at the lower level. (The Richmond VFL side acts as a feeder team for the AFL side – a proving ground for players to show their worth and hopefully step up to the seniors.) McRae looks at the four kids running riot and smiles: "Look at all those 50s. It's a heavy number, isn't it?"

For the first five weeks Pickett was at the club, McRae says, he was in physical rehab, running with the injured Alex Rance. The gun defender was out for the season with a ruptured anterior cruciate ligament, and encouraged Pickett throughout the gruelling fitness sessions – a mini pre-season in the depths of winter. Pickett proved a quick study, and eager. "He's quiet, but he's also the sort of guy who'll just turn up: 'Have you got anything for me, coach?'" says McRae. "This is weeks before he was even playing – he was just craving, aching for feedback."

When he started playing, says McRae, he would get the ball and turn right, when they wanted him to go left – but within a few weeks he started to "look like Richmond". In every game Pickett played at the lower level, he lifted. "There are opportunities when the game needs someone to stand up, and Marlion has been the one – consistently – who says 'Follow me' with his actions. For a guy who doesn't know the system or his teammates, it's remarkable."

He capped it off, of course, six days before the AFL grand final, in Richmond's VFL grand final victory over Williamstown, his 20 possessions and nine tackles earning him the Norm Goss Medal for best on ground. Regular Tigers midfielder Jack Graham had injured his shoulder two days earlier, leaving the door ajar for a storied AFL debut, and Pickett's performance proved a perfect audition. Clarke talked to him in the rooms immediately after that, when all the other boys were jumping around and celebrating. "He was laid-back, and I think he knew there was possibly another game for him to play," says Clarke. "Marlion said, 'I've gotta train this week, gotta contribute.' He had already clicked into that mode."

Thursfield believes Pickett never really leaves that mode, and is perhaps the very definition of single-minded. "He's always engaged. He doesn't say a whole lot, but he listens with great intent. He's got this lovely look in his eyes, too. You know what he's doing it for, and that nothing will stop him."

PLENTY COULD have stopped him. Once drafted by Richmond, his path to an historic debut was neither linear nor smooth. After his famous first goal in the third quarter of the grand final, in front of a televised audience of 2.94 million, you might remember him ambling forward with the barest smile on his face, raising one hand in the air. He wasn't calling attention to his goal – he was dedicating it to loved ones, gone too soon. "I don't really celebrate goals much," he told me later. "I pointed to the sky, that was for the hard times, and the family me and Jess have lost along the journey. The celebration was for them."

Pickett's first months in Melbourne were marred by tragedy. Early on while he was training, close relative Darryl Walley – a man who'd been supportive of him as a child – passed away, succumbing to emphysema. Pickett flew back to Perth for the funeral in June. He flew back again a month later, in July, for the funeral of a mate who had died of a drug overdose. While he was there, grieving that loss, his friend and former cellmate Sam Nannup – brother to his partner Jess, uncle to his four children – took his own life, having only left prison a few weeks earlier. Pickett flew back again for that funeral on August 22 – three burials in three months.



"That was a lot of stress. Hard times for the missus and me," is how Pickett describes it. Yet he returned to Richmond alone each time, to keep training in the wind and rain, while Jess remained in Perth with the kids, supporting her extended family. "I just tried to keep the family stuff aside, keep it away from football," says Pickett. "But it was hard ringing up the missus. Real hard. I couldn't do anything for her."

Pickett says he did what had to be done to find his groove in the chaos. This is what he does, too, on the field. When he can't gather the ball, he says, he focuses on tackles. "I try not to drop my head too much when it's not going our way. I just focus on the little things, until it clicks. When I'm playing good footy, I'm happy."

Thursfield knows all this – the recruiter even flew to Perth with Pickett for one of the funerals, so that someone from the club would be by his side – and he gets a little teary now. He lives in the same Thornbury neighbourhood as Pickett, and drives him to training most days. They've developed a clear bond. "We're family for him now," says Thursfield. "I don't want to get too emotional, but he's had a big impact on my life – in three months. Just seeing where he's from, and the strength he has, to do what he's doing for his family. I love the man. I really do."

**O**NCE THE big game was over and all the interviews done, the Tigers scattered to the four winds, as players do when the off-season beckons. You can find most of them on Instagram. Forward Tom Lynch at a café in Bali. Backman Alex Rance at Yosemite National Park in California. Nick Vlastuin kiteboarding in Indonesia. Sydney Stack winning a dance contest in Thailand.

Pickett, before the first long night of post-match celebrations had even really begun, went home early. His mother, Angela, and father, Thomas, had flown across for the grand final, his dad confined to a wheelchair owing to crippling emphysema, and he wanted to share the moment with them. Within a week, he'd quietly signed a new one-year deal with the club, staying in Melbourne and settling his four children and partner into their new surrounds. "Footy and family," says his manager. "That's all he wants in his life."

Van Der Wielen has kept almost all media at bay during the post-season, too, not just because his client is looking for a sense of quiet comfort, but on behalf of Jess. "She's a strong girl but a quiet girl," he says. "And I think she would no doubt be struggling with the loss of her brother, and being away from her extended family. They need some time. But they're happy with this life they're creating in Melbourne."

By all accounts, Jess is a determined woman, intensely proud of both her Indigenous heritage and the things her husband and family have come through. She writes messages online that speak to this strength: "The game of life is a lot like football – you have to tackle your problems, block your fears, and score your points when you get the opportunity." She pays tribute to Marlion, too, for the ride they've been on – taking the good with the bad: "I love everything that we have been through, because they made us the husband and wife that we are today. Thank you for this sweet and beautiful life."

They chose their new patch carefully. The kids – whose names Pickett has tattooed on his left rib cage – are enrolled at the local primary school, which has an Indigenous Studies program. Jess, who minds the kids full-time, has joined a local footy team, too. She's tiny – "lucky to be five foot tall" – but a speedy half-forward flank. From their modest home, she can walk across the street a few nights a week to train with the Fitzroy Stars, a local institution within a strong Indigenous enclave.

They're making connections, and trying to shake a feeling of impermanence. The past six months have been nothing but lows and highs, separations and reunions – more than two dozen flights back and forth between east and west. They've been billeted out and stayed in Airbnbs. Neither owns a car, so they're familiarising themselves with the number 11 tram and the Epping line train. Other than a short visit at Christmas, they have no plans to return to Western Australia.

Pickett is already back in training, too, itching for pre-season to start, to show what he can do after a full summer of sweating and straining. Holding his place within a premiership side will not be easy, but no one knows how good he might be once exposed to the regimens of an elite full-time fitness and football program. He's not taking anything for granted. A handful of players from the club live in his area, so the past few weeks he's been boxing with them. Hitting the heavy bag with full-back David Astbury. Holding up contact gloves for half-forward Kane Lambert. Sparring with back flank Jayden Short. He's throwing his best punch.

Shortly before this new life began, he told me this was his plan. "Gotta put my head down, work hard, spend quality time with family," he said, nodding, and smiling only with his eyes. "Gotta celebrate the journey we're on." ■

*Above: Pickett and Sydney Stack at training before the AFL grand final.*

*Konrad Marshall's Stronger & Bolder: Inside the 2019 Finals Series with Richmond (Hardie Grant, \$30) is out Monday.*

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