

**FOOTBALL ** Jimmy Bartel is one of many Geelong Falcons players who have become superstars with the help of Michael Turner, writes WAYNE BUTTNER

Michael Turner takes his “father figure” role seriously at the Geelong Falcons – right down to telling players to get a haircut and pull up their socks, literally. But when that type of advice leads to being an AFL premiership captain, who wouldn’t listen?

Turner has been the AFL regional manager with the Falcons for more than 20 years – developing young players, handing out advice and churning out AFL superstars.

Think Gary Ablett jnr, Cameron Ling, Jimmy Bartel, Matthew Scarlett, Luke Hodge, Nick Maxwell, Jonathan Brown, Patrick Dangerfield and Travis Boak. Eight AFL captains, numerous premiership players, Brownlow and Norm Smith medallists.

Every week during the football season there are around 30 former Falcons playing AFL matches, often dominating. That’s more than a full football team.

Turner and his team have become Australia’s most successful training ground for AFL footballers. There are many reasons why Turner thinks the Falcons’ program is so successful – although he constantly credits the great team around him.

But every team needs a manager, coach, mentor ... call it what you like. Turner is that person for the Falcons. He believes his time as a teacher, champion footballer and father himself has given him the skills to help young players achieve their football dreams.

Then there’s his own father’s influence. Turner (245 games from 1974-1988) and his dad Leo (130 games, 1947-1954) both played on the wing for Geelong and – in what Turner describes as the highlight of his football career – both were named on the wing in Geelong’s team of the century.

“There’s a lot of good father and sons out there but not two who have both made team of the century in the same position,” says Turner, who has two sons of his own, Levi and Che.

“Dad was a big influence in my life, and not only in football. He kept me on the straight and narrow. I had a lot of respect for him and it helped level me out and keep me from going too far.

“I was a bit of wild boy in my 20s, but I think that’s also helped in my work with the young players.

“There’s a lot of ‘experts’ out there who will tell you what’s wrong and right. But often they’re what I call cleanskins – they’ve never done a thing wrong in their life, they haven’t lived through mistakes.

“I can see the black and white, both sides, and at times it helps provide good advice on decision-making.

“Most of us do some stupid things when you’re young. We’re constantly telling our young players, ‘Don’t put anything on Facebook that you wouldn’t want your mum to see!’”

But back to that “fatherly” advice that helped one of Geelong’s favourite sons go on to become an AFL premiership captain.

“As a 17-year-old, Cameron Ling didn’t get picked up in the draft because he was what you would call a stocky full-forward,” Turner says.

“I was worried he wouldn’t get drafted again the next year, so I suggested he get his hair cut so that he would look more athletic and taller.

“We also got him a larger pair of shorts as his tight-fitting shorts tended to make his legs look bigger. Finally, to make him look more like the athlete that he was, we got him to pull his socks up and have his mum cut his shorts shorter so that his legs looked longer.

“We always knew he would work his backside off to be the very best. So once he was there it was no surprise



that he went on to become a great player, leader and premiership captain.”

Bartel, another Cats legend, got some unusual advice from Turner.

“Jimmy was playing with us in the under-16s – but didn’t make the Victoria Country team,” Turner says.

“At the time he was wearing a big helmet as he’d suffered concussion a couple of times playing with Bell Park and, naturally, his mum was looking after his best interests. But it made him look shorter and slower, so I suggested he dump it next season.

“He went on to play in the 17 and then 18-year-old All Australian teams, got drafted and he’s now a superstar. It’s just one of those quirky little things that can make a difference.

“AFL clubs can be pretty conservative. I’m not saying they don’t like kids with long hair or stuff like that – if you’re a superstar you’ll get away with it. But if you’re on the edge you’ve got to present a certain image to them so they are prepared to say, ‘This kid is worth the risk – he’s level-headed, he trains hard’”

There are lots of stories around that show just how much Turner puts in to provide his charges with the best chance to play their best possible football.

He says the Geelong Falcons provide a lifestyle program, rather than a football program.

“When players come to us, it’s about them becoming better on and off the field, about how best to train and get the best from their body, learning about sleep, the best diet, psychology and hydration,” Turner says. “To be an elite athlete you have to get your lifestyle right.”

There’s also a lot more to learn about how the modern game is played. “AFL nowadays is all about defence,” he

“DAD WAS A BIG INFLUENCE IN MY LIFE ... HE KEPT ME ON THE STRAIGHT & NARROW”

says. “A player may have the ball 40 times in a match, but how much has that influenced the overall game? His possessions may only add up to three or four minutes of play ... what has he been doing the rest of the time?”

“We take players from local clubs and aim to bridge the gap between knowledge and experience so that if drafted by an AFL club they are ready.

“The difference at an AFL level is that it’s full time, fully professional, and very intense. But when they come back, our players say they were prepared for it. The system works and if you don’t come through the system, good luck.”

The stats confirm that. The Falcons are No.1 in Australia for draft numbers, games played and awards won. There are 45 Falcons on the AFL list in 2015 – far more than any other development region.

Playing at an AFL level is tough – and Turner would know. He played 245 games with the Cats, was captain for three seasons and an All Australian in 1979.

While Turner talks about the importance of maintaining a positive approach, he’s still ready to let players know when they need to pick up their game.

“We can also be brutally honest and, if a player is doing the wrong thing, I’ll sit them in my office and I’ll give it to them,” he says.

FOOTY’S FATHER FIGURE



All Australian: Michael Turner has churned out a tonne of AFL footy stars through the Geelong Falcons’ training program.

Right attitude: Turner, with young Falcons players, is always ready with some advice. (REG RYAN)

“They have to be prepared for the environment they may end up in. If they end up at Carlton with Mick Malthouse or Hawthorn with Alastair Clarkson, it’s on you know.”

Of course, not every Falcons player ends up playing AFL. In last year’s Geelong Football League grand final (Leopold versus Colac), almost 30 ex-Falcons played.

“Our aim is to get players to an AFL and VFL level, but we also provide future player and coaches for local leagues,” Turner says.

He says it’s important to understand that players develop at different stages.

“There’s a chronological age and biological age – and my own experience as a late-developer in football has helped me realise this. Nick Maxwell, for instance, didn’t make any of our squads until he was 18,” he says.

“Gary Ablett jnr was a very small kid and late developer. In under-15s, he was the last kid picked – held back by his biological development.

“We let him go as a 16-year-old because we wanted him to mature and he went out to Modewarre and played. He came back as he was turning 17, had grown enough and was drafted by the Cats.

“Mind you, a lot of parents went off their tree when he did get picked in our squad, claiming it was only

THE CATS IN 2015

It was a tough opening round for the Cats, so can they go the distance this year? “The Cats have done an amazing job to have such sustained success over the past 10 years,” says Turner. “Fans don’t realise just how hard that is and they’ve been pretty spoilt for 10 years.

“The club is going through transition and in the past four or five years lost 15 absolute champions that helped win premierships. This season will be tough, and everything will have to go right for them to make the top four. But, once there, anything can happen.”

because of his dad. We haven’t had too many calls since to say we got it wrong.”

But Turner says all the skills and preparation in the world won’t help without the right attitude.

“If you don’t have the right attitude you can’t play at a high level – the right attitude is almost always our first priority.

“As an example, Nathan Ablett was a great player with fantastic skills, but didn’t have the same attitude as Gary. It’s all about attitude.”

With a long list of superstars having come through his time at the Falcons, Turner is reluctant to name a single best player.

“They all have different skills at different ages – for instance, Luke Hodge was the best player I have ever seen at 17 years old.

“Matthew Scarlett is probably the best full-back ever, Ling is a great leader ... while Bartel is an absolute superstar but isn’t as interested in taking up a key leadership role such as being captain.”

But when pushed, the conversation comes back to Ablett jnr. “A late developer, a great kid ... yes, probably the greatest player ever.” \

wbuttner@theweeklyreview.com.au