





Five years ago, Olinda Ferny Creek Football Netball Club's Peri Stewart thought she would never run on to a netball court again.

Stewart broke a number of bones in a serious car accident and, as a result, had to go through significant rehabilitation and overcome difficulties walking.

"I broke my sacrum, which was the major one," she explained.

"They had to fuse my spine together and put some bolts in.

"I broke my wrist and my collarbone... I had to take nearly a season off."

In that time she spent on the sidelines, Stewart decided to start afresh. She relocated from Woori Yallock to the tight-knit community of Olinda, where the Bloods were instrumental in helping her return to the court.

"There's no way I would be playing anywhere near here if they weren't so supportive and encouraging," she said.

"They would never push me into anything I didn't want to do."

Olinda Ferny Creek's pivotal role in helping Stewart get back on to the court is somewhat symbolic of the culture the club has built in recent times. The Bloods' Premier A Grade side won three of the past four AFL Yarra Ranges premierships and have continued their domination throughout this season so far in the new Outer East competition.

The Bloods sit well ahead in first place, having won all 11 games they've played by an average margin of 39 goals. Stewart has been a clear standout in the competition, scoring 575 goals – 296 more than the next best shooter – with an average 47.9 goals per match.

But the modest shooter said she can't take all the credit for her impressive form.

"I don't get the ball unless they give it to me, so my job I don't think is anywhere near as hard as the rest of the girls," she said.

Olinda Ferny Creek's head netball coach, Tim Smith, said the team's success comes down to the nature of each and every individual player.

"They embrace everything, they embrace the community side expectations of the club," he said.

"But more importantly their own expectations and their commitment to each other.

"They are very good people and history will say that organisations that have long-term success start with good people."

As much as the culture of a club is often the catalyst for success, it doesn't make up the entire picture. The club's netball program has seen Smith train the side to have structure, but also flexibility within the playing style.

"We don't hope for intercepts, we don't hope for goals, we manufacture them," he said.

"We're not drilled to the point that we're robotic but we're drilled to the point that we understand if this happens we can do this, this and this..."

"Our defenders know what the goalers are doing, (and) our goalers know what the defenders are doing."

When it comes to preventing the girls from getting too ahead of themselves, Smith said he doesn't need to worry.

"The girls certainly don't need me to keep them grounded," he said.

"They drive their own humility within the group.

"I'm fortunate enough just to be the guy driving the bus. I drive the bus and they all hop off and say to me this is what we're doing and off we go."

Despite the Bloods' complete dominance across the competition, netball manager Matt Blanchard said they need to keep on their toes to stay ahead of the pack in years to come.

"We're working on a model for long-term success," he said.

"We've probably got a more mature list in A grade. Over the last couple of years, we've been introducing a younger player every year.

"In any sport, it's a credit to those players to keep playing at that level. Quite often you can take the foot off the pedal but they're a very competitive bunch.

"When you're in that situation, you've got clubs coming at you as well. There's a lot of young talent in those clubs down south-east and we'll be challenged this year for the rest of this season."

Some of those clubs Blanchard is referring to include the likes of Cranbourne, Beaconsfield and Berwick. Although Olinda Ferny Creek has proven too strong against these sides in recent times, coach Smith said they'll keep knocking on the Bloods' door both now and into the future.

"We can already see, other teams, they've played us once and the alarms bells have gone off," he said.

"They've already reacted in many different ways and I can see that they'll react even more next season, they won't sit still."

The Bloods have some tough competition ahead as they head towards finals. They face Woori Yallock in Round 13 and then second-placed Beaconsfield the following week. The Eagles are the only team to have proven a threat so far, with the last outing going the Bloods' way 61-42.

But for Stewart, as much as she loves winning, her life experience has helped give her a fresh perspective. She said it's a privilege to be able to play the sport she loves at such a wonderful club.

"This bunch of girls are awesome," she said.

"They play with integrity and discipline and they're a great club to be apart of.

"I'm super, super lucky to be here and I'm really grateful that I'm here."

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