

Darwin football club recovers from domestic violence scandal

105.7 ABC Darwin By Emilia Terzon

Updated Mon 6 Oct 2014, 12:52pm



PHOTO: "Speak to somebody instead of resorting to a form of violence," said domestic violence perpetrator and Nightcliff Football Club joint division 1 captain, Mr Tolley.

A Darwin football player has been reinstated as captain of his team after making an emotional speech to his club about his perpetration of domestic violence.

Local carpenter Justin Tolley and his long-term partner joined Nightcliff Football Club after they moved to Darwin in mid-2013.

"I stumbled into [Nightcliff Oval] one day and signed up. I fell in love with the place," said Mr Tolley.

His partner joined the women's league and Mr Tolley was made captain of the men's Division One.

The pair seemed like the perfect sporting couple on field, but off-field their relationship was increasingly marked by fighting and drinking.

Things came to a head in February when police were called to their home and Mr Tolley was charged with domestic assault.

Mr Tolley's relationship ended and his ex-partner moved back to Melbourne.

His actions also cost him another central part of his life: playing footy on the weekends with his mates.

The club's response to domestic violence

Mr Tolley was stood down as captain after Nightcliff Football Club learned of his pending charges.

The decision followed the club's involvement in No More, a campaign against domestic violence run by counselling service CatholicCare NT.

Nightcliff is the first club to have signed up to the program's Domestic Violence Action Plan.

RELATED STORY: [NBA reviews domestic violence policies following NFL crisis](#)

RELATED STORY: [10 charts that reveal Australian attitudes to violence against women](#)

MAP: Darwin 0800

This plan enforces a zero tolerance response to players who are violent to a partner until they seek and attend counselling.

Mr Tolley said the realisation that he had crossed a violent line and brought his club into disrepute was heartbreaking.

So he decided to front up to his team about his pending court conviction.

"I just walked up in front of the playing group and broke down. Everybody looked at me like it wasn't happening," he said.

"One thing I'll always remember is walking off [the field] and the boys running up to me to say they're here for me.

"The whole thing was a turnaround when I was arrested and I had to confront my football team."

Mr Tolley said the support of his club, friends and new partner were crucial as he pleaded guilty in court and was sentenced to a three-month prison sentence.

Counselling has also taught him about his personal triggers and acceptable outlets for anger, he said.

"I can't speak for everybody [who commits domestic violence], but in my case drugs and alcohol were a factor."

He spent his jail term reflecting on his actions, training in the prison yard and dreaming about playing footy again.

"My ultimate goal was to come back to Nightcliff."

That goal was fulfilled in August when Mr Tolley was released from prison and invited back to train with his old team.

Coming back to the team

Nightcliff's vice-captain Mark Tibbits said his friend was physically and mentally different when he came back to the club after prison.

"It was a bit funny. He went in a big bloke and came out skinny," said Mr Tibbits.

"Jacko's total attitude has changed to training. He's like a new person.

"He has goals and he wants to make it up to everybody, especially the girls' team that he works with."

Mr Tibbits said it was important that Nightcliff supported their disgraced player during his turnaround "and didn't push him away".

"I think everybody has learned that nobody wants to be in that situation," he said.

That message was reinforced on Tuesday when Mr Tolley made an emotional speech to his club about his domestic violence conviction.

"There is a victim at heart in this, and that's [my former partner]," he said to a teary group of players.

"There were also two lovely families that were torn apart, and my son couldn't see his father and had some hard questions to ask of me.

"It tore me apart to sit there and watch my team in the grand final and know I'd let them all down.

"Every day I'm trying to make it up, because I couldn't picture being anywhere but here."

I can't speak for everybody ...
but in my case drugs and
alcohol were a factor.

Justin Tolley

I have a mother, sister and a
new partner. I know how
people perceive me, but all I
can do is change.

Living with a violent stigma

Mr Tolley told the ABC that he will probably never overcome the stigma of having hit a woman he loved.

"It's something you carry around with you forever."

Yet he is hopeful for the future and a new relationship with a woman he met during his court proceedings.

"I have a mother, sister and a new partner. I know how people perceive me, but all I can do is change."

Mr Tolley's turnaround was recognised on Thursday night when he was reinstated as Division One joint captain alongside Mr Tibbits.

"I just want to not take anything for granted," said Mr Tolley.

Nightcliff plays its first games of the NTFC 2014-15 season this Sunday.

Topics: domestic-violence, assault, australian-football-league, sports-organisations, darwin-0800

First posted Fri 3 Oct 2014, 4:44pm
