

Ian Stewart

Player of the day

Ian 'Stewie' Stewart was born at home in Grimsby, Lincolnshire, England, in September 1956. His mum still lives in that house. He'd go to Grimsby Town games with his dad from when he was 8 years old. "Two for one, mate," his dad would say to the turnstile guy and slip him some copper coins, and father and son would squeeze through the turnstile together. "The ground always looked fuller than the official attendance," he remembers.

Stewie went to a couple of Grimsby games last season while visiting his mum. "The stand we used to squeeze into is still basically the same," he says, but the reminiscence is touched with sadness. "It's a pity we're not there together anymore, but we have our memories, don't we? Dad and son football days out and the half time sausage roll and hot Bovril." He still had the sausage roll this time as well and ... "The Bovril was still available but I went for a couple of pints of best bitter instead."

His earliest memory of playing football is seeing his dad secretly watching him from beyond the school fence when he made his debut for the junior school team. Stewie was a left back. He played for the school team every year but never quite made the area rep teams. His highest level of achievement was Div 1 in the Grimsby area Sunday morning comp.

His most memorable moment is scoring a hat trick of near post headers from



corners. He also scored 3 own goals in one game while playing for the school. "I feel I may have been dropped the following week."

One day Stewie was helping a friend and fellow house painter paint a house where a young lass lived and who went to work just before 9am. "I would always make sure I was working on the front door as she left," he remembers, "it had more gloss coats than 10 Downing Street."

"It's no good getting serious with me," she said, "I'll be going back to Oz in a year or so."

They were married in 1986 and came to Australia in June 1987.

Stewie moved away from football just after he turned 50. However, at 14, his daughter declared she wanted to play the game. She played the lowest grade in her first season and the team had no coach. Thus began a 10-season stint as a women's football coach. "Loved it!"

With football continuing to run in his blood, he went to visit his mum in May 2017, and a good friend from way back invited him to join a walking football

session run as part of an active aging program by the local council in Grimsby. So Stewie walked onto the field where he had played as a kid, the home ground of the local pub team he'd played for, just 5 minutes stroll from his mum's house. The football fates had woven a full circle.

He had so much fun that day that he saw it as a mission to start up a walking football chapter in Sydney's Northern Beaches when he returned to Australia. After three months of harassing and challenging people to play, the first session got under way on 11 September 2017, a 4 v 4 game with Ian as the ref.

The Northern Beaches crowd now have four sessions a week, catering to various levels and with slightly different rules to suit each group. Only one of the sessions is played with goalkeepers, other sessions play 3-touch, another plays 4-touch and the super senior social guys have up to 5-touch, depending on skill level. All sessions have a special zone that you need to be in before you can score.

“The thing I most love about walking football is the making of new friends, the joy of the game and the after-game banter. And that sort of thing is especially significant for our super seniors session on Thursday mornings. It's just so gratifying to see our retirees having so much fun.”

He suddenly smiles as if

he's only just remembered. “I won the Golden Boot at the IWFF event in London in 2019.” He has dined out on that achievement for a few years now, but he doesn't consider it to be the best part of the tournament; that kind of pride is reserved for the Aussie team being voted by the referees as the team that played the game the way it should be played – with respect for the rules, the refs and the opposition, and with a smile.

Ian Stewart is one of the truly great characters of walking football in Australia. He is one of the most significant figures in the development of the game in this country.

“We've done the hard yards, haven't we?” he muses. “House. Kids, Grandkids. It's time to be that young lad again before the lights go out. To meet up for a fun kick around and talk football and stuff with guys you share the passion with. Happy Days.”

