

*'I saw a sign near the club, called up and said, I just want to play'*

# It's game on – in every sense

For decades young girls have been running around Australian back yards, kicking a footy and dreaming of glory on the big stage—just like the boys.

But for those previous generations of women there was no way to make it all come true, no matter how talented or passionate they were.

Well, those days are no more.

The book of sporting fairytales is now lying wide open in front of them and thousands are rushing forward to add their names to a compelling new chapter.

Among them are Tara Bohanna and Monique DeMatteo, both coming off successful “rookie” seasons.

Bohanna was a key member of the undefeated Eastern Devils that carried off the South Eastern Women's division one premiership last year.

DeMatteo made her mark with West Preston-Lakeside, which finished runner-up in the Northern League's division two competition.

“I'd mostly been a basketballer, but I was always a huge fan of football; I grew up playing it,” said Bohanna, the reigning competition MVP.

“I actually forced my brothers to go outside and play. I was a footy nut.

“When I was in Grade 6 at primary school I was the only female in our team with all the boys.

“It was an interesting thing, as I had to push to be let in. My PE teacher wanted me to do netball, but I was like ‘no, I want to do football’ and my parents and I both fought hard for me to be able to play.

“So I was the first girl at our school to play footy and that was really awesome.

“I also played a few years with the boys at Whitehorse Colts (in the Yarra Junior League) until I got to that age where girls weren't allowed to play; I think it was under-12s.”

Bohanna went on to play hoops with the Blackburn Vikings in the Big V league.

“Basketball was the higher level (of competition) at that time,” she said. “I couldn't see too much of a future with footy.

“Yet even when I was playing basketball footy was always there ... it was always part of my life.

“Dad's Irish and when he came over he got to liking it (football) and Mum was always a Carlton supporter so she persuaded him to go for the Blues and from there we were always mad Carlton fans.”

Having not played competitive football for a number of years, Bohanna attended a talent search event aimed at girls from other sports in 2016 and then took part in the AFL women's academy program the following summer.

Eventually she found her way to an Eastern Devils training session.

“I was training for basketball and footy at the end of 2016, but it was too much and I decided to just give footy a crack given all the hype surrounding the AFLW and there now being an elite pathway,” she said.

“And I haven't looked back. We won the premiership and I got a few games in the VFL side, which was an amazing experience.”

Bohanna has joined the Southern Saints (St Kilda's women's outfit) and is presently gearing up for a full crack at a VFLW campaign.



**School trailblazer:** Tara Bohanna unleashes a kick for the Eastern Devils.

DeMatteo's experience mirrors Bohanna's in a lot of ways.

Her childhood love of football was also stifled by lack of opportunity.

“I always played with my Dad when I was a kid and was a crazy fan of it,” she said.

“But I went into basketball from about the age of 11 because football was never really an option; there was nowhere to go with it.”

A couple of matches at school was DeMatteo's sum total of organised football, yet with doors opening up everywhere for women over the past 18 months she made her way into the code.

“I was looking for a club because I wasn't playing basketball anymore and wanted to get back into something competitive” she said.

“I saw a sign near the club, called up and said ‘I just want to play.’”

And play she did, winning West Preston-Lakeside's best-and-fairest and the coaches' award in the NFL's second tier, while finishing second in the league best-and-fairest.

“When we started about three quarters of us (rookie players) couldn't kick the ball properly, but the improvement throughout the year as we went through to the grand final was just amazing,” said DeMatteo, who is doing a pre-season with Essendon's VFLW team. “You could clearly see it. The improvement was massive.”

Bohanna's Devils line-up, also loaded with first-timers, took the huge learning curve in its stride, too.

“It was crazy how we were able to come together so quickly and form such a good unit,” she said.

“Everyone was just super pumped about all these new players coming in.”

The mentoring they received at community level obviously fast-tracked the transition.

“The coaches we had ... their input was just invaluable. It was always positive; there wasn't



**Walk-up starter:** Monique DeMatteo breaks through the lines for West Preston-Lakeside.

one time when I felt there was any negativity around our team.”

Added DeMatteo: “The level of coaching we had access to last year was wonderful.”

With both girls in their early 20s, the game's sudden, dramatic evolution has come at the ideal time.

“For me it's perfect,” DeMatteo said. “I'm at an age where I can push myself and my body.

“Now we have the opportunity to potentially get there (the AFLW).”

Bohanna agreed: “It's now an option, an opportunity you might get to a chance to grab.”

While it's easy to get caught up in the moment as irresistible momentum and enormous hype reshape the code, these two are cognisant of their own small role in a significant revolution.

“To be there when all of this is first starting up ... it's pretty incredible,” Bohanna said.

“The number of women and girls pouring into the code is absolutely crazy.

“We definitely know how big it (the phenomenon) is because of all that.”

DeMatteo, who literally lived for game day last season, also sees the big picture.

“Every game we were all just so excited to play the sport we have a passion for,” she said.

“But to be the first women's team to play out of West Preston-Lakeside ... that was pretty special.

“The club was really good about making that a big deal. Even the boys, they all got around us.

“We'll look back on this in 10 or 20 years and say ‘wow, I was actually part of the beginning of it.’”

“My Dad even said to me when I won the club best-and-fairest, ‘that will always be the first one ever.’”