



Nick Tavouktsis.

Photo: Adam Hollingworth

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**A former child football prodigy, cruelled by injury, has found a new dream to pursue - a career in the NFL, writes Adrian Prosenko.**

Nick Tavouktsis used to kick a soccer ball so hard that he was dubbed "Bazookas" by his teammates.

A scholarship holder with Fulham and Tottenham Hotspur in his teens, Tavouktsis was clocked firing bullets into the back of the net at 130kmh.

Rated the best soccer talent in NSW at age 13 and courted by English clubs, it seemed nothing was going to stop the Sydney striker from becoming a Premier League star.

Nothing, that is, until one of the most horrific run of leg injuries imaginable. Three knee reconstructions later and his sporting career appeared over before it really began.

That was until he picked up *The Sun-Herald* last month. Having read the story of Ben Matterson, a lower-grade rugby league player trying his hand at American football, Tavouktsis figured he too may have an alternate calling for his monstrous left boot.

And it appears he may be right. In only his first session with Australian NFL talent scouts, the 24-year-old started slotting field goals from 45 metres out - a skill that could earn him big bucks in the NFL.

"He's the most consistent and accurate kicker I've seen," said Cameron McGillivray, from the Australian Punting and Kicking Academy (Ozpunt).

"The first thing people that have seen his film say is, 'Geez, he's got a strong leg'. He backs it up with consistency as well and coaches are going to find his soccer background appealing. A lot of kickers in the NFL come from a soccer background, that's why when people kick field goals a certain way they refer to it as 'soccer style'.

"Nick has the potential and the skill to make it over there. He'll be somebody over the next 18 months people will be hearing more about."

Tavouktsis hasn't played professional sport for more than five years to let his body recover from his luckless run of injuries. But the child prodigy, one of the youngest inductees into the Australian Institute of Sport at age 14, believes he is ready to fulfil his potential, albeit in a foreign code.

"I've had a long lay-off to let my body rest and rejuvenate and hadn't had any recurrence of any niggling injuries," he said.

"I've always had a reputation as being a rather strong kicker. I've always been technically strong and I've been clocked kicking the ball at 130kmh when I was a youngster, about 16 or 17. The glitz and glamour of the NFL really appeals to me and it's a chance to realise my talent.

"You can make a lot of money and it's something you can do for a substantial time; there are guys that kick into their 40s."

The Revesby resident will continue working on his kicking technique in coming months with a view to trialling in the US early next year.

McGillivray believes Tavouktsis has a good chance of becoming the latest Australian to make it big in the NFL, where our kickers have become the flavour of the month.

"He's got a great chance of making it," McGillivray said. "Some people I've trained try to do kick-offs and field goals and it appears very rigid, but he's very fluid and natural in the way he approaches the ball."

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