

NFL wants Manu and other Kiwi hulks

STEVE KILGALLON - Sunday Star Times Last updated 05:00 03/05/2009

AN AMERICAN football scouting agency is establishing an Auckland office, determined to unearth an NFL star and Warriors winger Manu Vatuvei is top of their list.

Australian-based scouts OzPunt, who last month took eight Aussie Rules players to the US to trial as specialist punters, came back with a shopping list from eager NFL recruiters who want big, fast and strong wide receivers and kick returners.

The first man OzPunt boss Paul Shepherd wants to talk to is Warriors behemoth Vatuvei but they will also open a permanent office next month so they can throw open trials for any Kiwi rugby or league player who thinks they could cut it in gridiron.

"We're happy to talk to anyone from the rugby ranks over there who wants a crack at the NFL we're very seriously looking at your boys," Shepherd told the Star-Times.

"When we started talking to the [club scouts], they came down from the stands and Cameron McGillivray [Shepherd's business partner] had a copy of Inside Sport magazine, with Israel Folau on the cover and a story on Manu Vatuvei inside. They said 'see those guys, that's what I want, find us guys like that, how many have you got of them?' We said 'how many do you want?'"

Shepherd says: "I know what you guys can produce, and there are only so many All Black contracts around, so many Super 14 contracts, and there are a lot of guys who may never make it as an All Black but could do very well in the NFL. I've got to make this very clear: they came to us about this, they want to see what there is in New Zealand."

Competition for places on NFL rosters is intense, but the rewards are huge: the minimum contract is \$US360,000 a year and Shepherd believes a starting player would earn over \$2m a year.

He has been given a brief by NFL clubs of what they want: big defensive players, big and fast runners to play as kick returners and wide receivers, and punters capable of place-kicking 45 metres.

"We know what they want, so we could give [trialists] a very good indication and be very straightforward on whether they have a chance," he says. "We won't send blokes on a whim."

OzPunt have two players on extended trials, including Sydney Swans AFL star Nick Davis at San Diego. Several other AFL players have forged NFL careers.

Shepherd says he's very interested in Vatuvei, who used to watch the Patriots and Giants as a kid. Told of OzPunt's interest, Vatuvei said: "I always wanted to play gridiron when I was little, but it's pretty hard finding a team in New Zealand so I'd just have a muckaround with my mates.

"I'd love to have a go, it'd be pretty fun, but it would depend. I have to focus on the Warriors first and maybe after that I would."

Hurricanes fullback Cory Jane, a Tennessee Titans fan, said he would also love to play NFL but his All Blacks contract precludes him playing other contact sports. He's excited that other Kiwis might get their chance.

Only a handful of Kiwis have made it to the NFL, including Minnesota Vikings guard David Dixon and Will Hinchcliff, a wide receiver with Denver, Los Angeles and Washington. "I'd love to see some guys go out and

do it," says Hinchcliff. "Physically, I'd say [Kiwi rugby players] have the attributes, but whether they are professional enough and have the mental fortitude to be able to understand their role is another question.

"[As a wide receiver] you stand on your own under a ball that's spiralling down from 60m up; it's like playing bullrush with 11 gorillas running up trying to kill you 90% of people would drop it. But if you don't, the biggest thing you can ever do in American football is run a touchdown back the length of the field it blows the stadium roof off."