

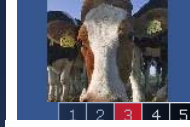
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## Miner seeks gold in US punt

By Marc McGowan

8th May 2009 04:10:51 PM

*Berwick Miners gridiron stars Steve Baker and Nick Vlad have recently earned national selection. 28680*

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LIFE could dramatically change for Berwick Miners gridiron star Steve Baker in the next couple of months.

The 30-year-old punter has joined former Sydney Swans and Collingwood footballer Nick Davis and other National Football League (NFL) hopefuls training with Australian-based scouts OzPunt under Cameron McGillivray for the past two years.

Baker and a select group, including Davis, flew out of the country last Friday to chase their American football dreams and possibly follow Australians Saverio Rocca, Ben Graham and Mat McBriar into the NFL.

They will be given a taste of what to expect if an NFL club does sign them, with NFL agents escorting them to an NBA match among other Hollywood-style treatment.

But the main purpose of Baker's three-week stay is the two trials in Texas in front of up to 20 NFL scouts at the end of his American jaunt.

"We have eight kicks to impress," he said.

"I could be the best punter outside those eight kicks, but if I don't pull it together on the day I won't be signed."

Baker has worked extremely hard in recent months in preparation for his once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Weights, fitness and skills sessions are now a daily ritual.

And the Mulgrave resident rejects those critics who say punters only have a minor role in the sport.

"They just don't understand. A punter has a vital role in the game. One good kick can turn around a whole game," he said.

Baker is also set to play for Australia for the first time after an impressive showing as Victorian captain at last year's Gridiron Australia Senior National Championships.

He and 44 other players will suit up for the Senior Australian Outback Team against Great Britain, Sweden and club side the Chester Romans in London from 11 to 26 July.

"I was pumped and very excited when I found out. It's always been a dream of mine to represent my country," Baker said.

Baker, who has played the sport for seven years, also plays the cornerback position on top of his punting duties.

His selection gives the Miners two national representatives in recent months after 17-year-old running back/wide receiver Nick Vlad played in Australia's Junior World Cup qualifier against New Zealand in January.

Vlad, a rowing and Australian Rules football scholarship-holder at Keysborough's Haileybury College, only started playing gridiron last year.

The Noble Park resident impressed for Berwick and Victoria before earning his national call-up.

"I pretty much rocked up to Miners' training for seniors and took it from there," Vlad said.

"It was a bit complicated at the start to learn all the rules, but after a while it felt pretty good and it started getting easier.

"I can play different positions and I'm quite fast for my size."

Vlad enjoyed the experience despite the Australians losing the Oceania playoff.

"It was really good getting to know the coaches from other states and also the players you normally play against, but it was a bit weird at the start," he said.

"It was good, but we (he and Baker) do get a bit teased by the (Miners') coaches!"

Vlad is looking forward to this month's start to the Gridiron Victoria season and representing his state at the Gridiron Australia Nationals from May 30 to 7 June.

Berwick is also holding its two-day training camp, including a controlled scrimmage against the ACT Monarchs, at Sydney Pargeter Reserve this weekend.

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