

“The great thing for Taj is Starkick is physio, occupational therapy, speech, all in one. And he is doing what he wants to do.”

Dad Matt adds: “It was so good to meet kids like him, outside of therapy.”

There is still a road ahead, but the bumps will be tempered by the reality Taj can rock up on a Sunday, just like all the other Auskickers, and look forward to a game of footy – and a hot dog afterwards.

“When Taj was born, many of the first gifts were footies. We thought, here we go, we’ve got an AFL star,” Danica recalls.

“We hoped that he would share his family’s love of the game. After his brain injury, amongst a million other feelings, I felt so sad that he wouldn’t have the chance to play footy.

“Back then, we had to put those hopes and dreams to the side.

“There were other things we needed to do. Instead of signing up for Auskick, it was choosing therapists to work on his rehab.

“But as he got older . . . I realised he can and will do what his heart desires and I will support that no matter what it is.

“Success does not have to mean becoming an athlete, it’s becoming whatever the hell you want to be.

“Then about a year ago, Taj started getting into footy – and when Taj gets into something, it becomes an obsession.

“He started watching footy highlights and then listening to the songs on YouTube, to watching the draft over and over and over again and telling us all sorts of facts. We noticed that he was pretty knowledgeable.

“It got to the point where we actually started saying ‘Taj, let’s listen to something else now’ or ‘how many times can you watch the grand final replay?’”

Matt says: “We asked him, for example, what number is Jason Horne-Francis at North Melbourne and he said six – and he’d just been drafted.”

So when Taj asked about joining Auskick, Danica dived into Google.



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“I was heartbroken. So I started googling and found the Starkick website,” she says.

“We went along to a session and I haven’t seen him so happy in years. He gets to play footy! Not just commentate or sing the songs. He is going to play, and so he should.

“And he doesn’t need mum and dad to push his chair either, there’s plenty of helping hands at the club so that we can sit on the sidelines and cheer him on.

“Starkick is something I wish I knew about years ago. It was so cool to see other kids using walkers, wheelchairs and other mobility aids playing the sport they love.”

After his pre-season hit-out, Taj will play every Sunday after the school holidays in Starkick, which runs alongside Auskick, for 16 weeks.

Rob Geersen, WAFC’s Starkick co-ordinator and founder, said the program had a simple mantra: If you want to play, we will find a way.

“It doesn’t matter what your situation is, we will find a way,” he says.

Founded in 2015, the program is open to boys and girls aged five to 17, and caters for those who are unable to join the club’s existing football programs, offering extra support with sessions based around the new Auskick program.

“It’s about having a go. We run some activities, some kicking, handball and at

Taj Deluca with mother Danica, father Matt, brother Vinnie, grandmother Jen “Mimsy” Wyss and sister Daisy. Below: Taj takes to the field.



the end, we play a game, just like everyone else,” Geersen says.

“The reality is for children with a disability, some may need that extra bit of support, so they can join in, too.

“Some with a physical disability may need help getting around, and other children may have disabilities that require different levels of support, it doesn’t matter.

“It’s about being a part of your local community and the sport is a byproduct.”

Geersen is speaking from experience. His son, Bradley, 14, contracted meningitis at 13 months and has since lived with cerebral palsy. Like Taj, he has been able to get his footy fix through the Starkick program.

Starkick has operated under the WAFC’s umbrella since June last year and now caters for about 200 children at 14 clubs in metropolitan Perth – in the north, south and central districts – and at Carey Park and Manjimup in the South West.

“Everyone deserves a chance to have a go,” he says.

Geersen added it was just as important for the Deluca family to feel a part of the club and that might include being rostered to cook the barbecue.

“That’s what community is all about, isn’t it? Just belonging and supporting each other.”

Go to starkick.com.au