



Justin Clarke has excelled since his AFL career was prematurely ended.

PHOTO: PETER TAYLOR

Limit beyond the sky for former Lion

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For many AFL fans, the name Justin Clarke may trigger a forgotten memory.

In early 2016 however, the former Booleroo local's name would have been on many supporters' lips, particularly Brisbane Lions' fans – his former club.

At that time, Clarke's best football seemed ahead of him.

The 22-year-old defender, with 56 career games already under his belt, had spent the previous season solidifying himself as a key cog in the Lions' backline.

Nobody would have guessed this young man's career would end after just four seasons.

However, for the common football fan, perhaps the most surprising aspect of Justin's journey is where he finds himself today – a Rhodes Scholar at the University of Oxford, deciphering different ways to return rocket ships from space.

Drafted in 2011 as a skinny 18-year-old still growing into his tall, six-foot five-inch frame, Justin, now 28, spent his first three professional seasons developing into one of the league's most exciting young talents.

He described his journey to the AFL as one that "moved very fast".

Unfortunately, Justin's career ended as abruptly as it began. A head collision with a teammate during a preseason training session caused him to lose consciousness, subsequently resulting in a concussion.

Although he didn't know it at the time, with

the aid of hindsight, Justin described the injury as a "sliding doors moment in my life".

Once regaining consciousness, he was rushed to hospital where the severity of the injury could be assessed – the results weren't good.

"Unfortunately, in the wake of the impact there were a lot of memory issues and ongoing symptoms resulting from the concussion that meant I wasn't physically able to continue playing football," he said.

A regular concussion will see an athlete sidelined for anywhere between one to four weeks.

However, all brain injuries are different and sometimes the severity of a particular injury isn't initially clear.

For Justin, he recalled being two months into his recovery and still being totally unable to run, concentrate, or leave a dark room.

At this point, he was sent to a specialist for neuropsychological testing, which unearthed the true gravity of his situation.

"The tests indicated my short- and medium-term memory was significantly impacted and hadn't really recovered much at all. My concentration was atrocious; the concussion tests were meant to take three to four hours, but they took me maybe four to five weeks to get through them. When I got the results back it was clear my footballing career was done," he said.

"I went into that training session a professional footballer, a Brisbane Lion, and afterwards... it was all over. I was a footballer who couldn't play football."

A common issue for AFL footballers drafted into the professional ranks straight out of high school is the lack of a back-up plan if things go array.

So, for many young footballers, a career end-

ing head injury would have spelled disaster, not only in terms of personal recovery and the ramifications associated with their injury, but also in terms of what they do with their life in lieu of an AFL career.

However, Justin Clarke wasn't your average footballer and he certainly isn't your average former professional athlete.

From a young age Justin took an interest in academics and excelled, graduating high school with an ATAR of 99.95, putting him in the top 0.05 per cent of South Australia in terms of results.

Fascinated with aviation and engineering, a year prior to finishing high school, Justin earned his pilot's license and tried to join the Australian Air Force but was rejected because of his height.

Ironically, his height was one of the biggest reasons he was drafted into the AFL.

In tandem with his four years in the AFL, Justin worked towards two separate engineering degrees at Charles Darwin University and The University of Queensland.

"I thoroughly enjoyed my time as an undergrad. I took up rowing, got involved in a little bit of uni life and really found a passion for aerospace," he says.

"Uni helped with my recovery. I had issues with my concentration and memory, but I knew I could structure my weeks around university.

"By going to a lecture on Monday, I would probably be wiped out for the Tuesday – that would be a quiet day – then I'd have something scheduled for the Wednesday. So, I could just step through the recovery process based on having a consistent schedule; this helped me massively."

Justin said the lack of "time to think" because

of his focus on getting to his next commitment or lecture helped him move on from the AFL and explore his other interests in greater depth.

It is this very exploration and keen curiosity which led to Justin becoming a Rhodes Scholar at the University of Oxford, which is the oldest and perhaps most prestigious international scholarship programme in the world, first awarded in 1902.

There, he is completing a PhD in engineering science and working as part of the University's hypersonics group.

"After footy finished I was able to push for further knowledge, which is something that I love doing, so it was a pretty natural progression and it progressed to a point where I was fortunate enough to get a Rhodes Scholarship to come over to the UK and study my PhD," he said.

"In some ways, I've been incredibly fortunate to be able to really pursue a career path given everything that happened."

Self-effacingly, Justin describes his work at Oxford as "pretty cool".

The hypersonics group utilises shock tunnels to experimentally mimic atmospheric entry by creating flows up to 11 times the speed of sound.

"When there are opportunities presented to me, I just try to take them and run with them as much as possible. To be here in the UK and to be learning from some of the best minds in the aerospace world is such a cool opportunity," he said.

The footballer-turned-academic hasn't abandoned the game of Australian Rules completely, recently accepting the role of coach for the University of Oxford's Women's AFL team and leading them to victory in February's Fitzpatrick Cup in Cardiff.