

A man of ENTERPRISE

This is not your traditional football story. Corey Payne, Bulldog back rower, former Tiger and Dragon. Known most recently for putting team mates into holes and, perhaps unfairly, dishing out rough justice to certain opposition fullbacks. Look at Rugby League Corey Payne in isolation and that might be all you see. But there is much, much more to the 27 year old than meets the eye. By Ross Smart

For here is a man with goals that stretch far beyond the 80 minutes. Don't get it twisted, his number one aspiration from a very young age was to play first grade for the Bulldogs. When you grow up at St Johns Park, where he still lives to this day, and play your junior football for the Chester Hill Hornets – club of the great Terry Lamb – the Bulldogs tend to be in the bloodstream. So, when he finally debuted for the Club at NRL level in round 26 of the 2010 season, against the Manly Sea Eagles at Brookvale Oval, he ticked a major goal off the list.

"As a youngster growing up all I wanted to do was play first grade Rugby League for the Bulldogs," Payne says. "I supported the team, supported the Club, I used to come out to Belmore Oval to watch the team go around. That set my ambitions to become a first grader for the Bulldogs.

"I love footy and I love the challenges that Rugby League presents to me. But I understand that the football career isn't something that I'm going to be able to do in my forties. Further study gives me opportunities and that's why I've always decided to persevere with my studies, however challenging they might have been."

Which brings us to the other constant in Corey's life. Study. Higher education was something that his parents, Steve and Liz, always encouraged Corey and his two siblings to pursue. He graduated with a Bachelor of Commerce, specialising in Accounting and Commercial Law, from the University of Sydney in 2007. Since then he's progressed to a Master of Commerce in Entrepreneurship & Finance, also from USYD, which he is on track to complete in the coming year.

It's a juggle. And he wouldn't have it any other way.



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Father Chris Riley, founder and CEO of Youth Off the Streets, often says that Australian society must have the courage to demand greatness from our youth. Payne, who sits on the charity's scholarship committee, embodies that ethos via his work to set up and run the Future Direction Network, which has a remit to provide the motivation, opportunity and introductions that might lead to the young people of western Sydney pursuing tertiary education.

"It's the kids on the borderline," Payne says of those FDN was set up to help. "Neither of their parents went to uni, first generation Australians, that sort of thing. "What I've found along the way is, if you're passionate about something and you have a bit of smarts about you, people are willing to give you opportunities. If you've shown you're genuinely passionate and interested in doing something, they'll help you create those opportunities. And then it's up to you what you do with them.

"The opportunities that Sydney Uni has given me are fantastic, second to none. I've been able to take most of them and turn them into really positive things for FDN."

He's passionate about helping the high schoolers of Sydney's south west because he has walked in their shoes. Payne's inspiration came via his father Steve, who has run a fresh fruit and convenience stall on Hunter street in Sydney's CBD for 40 years, and mum Liz, who was a hairdresser before turning her attention to raising three children – Corey, elder brother Aaron, and younger sister Ashleigh.

Aaron was first to attend University and is now a trader with JP Morgan, while

Ashleigh is a Sub Lieutenant in the Royal Australian Navy. All three kids took their parents advice when it came to further study, with Corey winning the University of Sydney's Young Alumni of the year award in 2011 while Ashleigh was the recipient of the Chief of Navy's most outstanding third year cadet during her time at the Australian Defence Force Academy in Canberra, being presented with the award by the 24th Governor General of Australia, Major General Michael Jeffery.

By any measure, the Paynes are high achievers. But Corey's message is simple. It takes more than talent to succeed – opportunities also need to be acted upon. "We had good support from our parents with whatever we wanted to do," he says. "Just encouragement. They never pushed us to play sport, never pushed us to do anything really, but they always encouraged us to go to uni. They were always adamant that university was the best way for their kids to get a better opportunity to secure jobs in the future.

"My Dad didn't have the opportunity, but he probably would have done well studying. One of the messages is you don't have to go to university to be successful right, but what university presents you is opportunity you just don't get anywhere else. And I think my parents just saw people in their generation who went on to uni and saw how successful they'd been and really that's why they encouraged all of us to go to uni. They should be proud of that."

His parent's encouragement got Payne from St John's Park and Westfield Sports High and through the gates at the University of Sydney. There he put his undoubted academic skill to good use both as an undergraduate and now a postgraduate scholar. But the whole time, he was in regular contact with friends that he'd grown up around, which formed the basis of the Future Direction Network as it stands today. The likes of former Bulldogs junior representative team mate Anthony Hadley, the son of a 'ten pound pom' who

grew up around Panania and Picnic Point. "(Anthony & I) played SG Ball and Flegg Grand Final together, and he went on to do a Bachelor of Engineering at Sydney Uni, and went on to work for one of the big engineering companies, SKM. He went back and did a Master of Applied Finance at Macquarie and now he works in corporate finance at Deloitte. He's done quite well, he's on the road."

Hadley's story is not unique, and indeed is echoed in the bios of all FDN's founding directors. There's Irene Pediotis, an Accountant who grew up across the road from Corey and whose parents owned the local fish and chip shop. Nirus Kanna, who sat alongside him in class from kindergarten through to their graduation from Westfield Sports High, and is now a Real Estate Securities Analyst at Hong Kong based Independent Stockbroker CLSA Australia. And Jennifer Slaviero, who grew up around Liverpool and Casula and is now a lawyer at the Office of Legal Services Commissioner. As a rule, all founding directors, along with relatively recent appointees in Tanya Huynh and Nicole Kassis, either hold postgraduate qualifications, are working towards them, or have double undergraduate degrees. An impressive bunch.

The Future Direction Network, despite all it has achieved thus far, is still in its relative infancy. It works primarily with the University of Sydney, along with Fairfield High and Westfields Sports High School. Federal Minister for Immigration and Citizenship and Member for McMahon Chris Bowen and Seven newsreader Chris Bath – both products of western Sydney – are on board as ambassadors, and the likes of Anna Cesarano, Director of Doltone House, Daryl Melham, the Federal Member for Banks,

Taking on Darren Lockyer at Suncorp Stadium



Payne offloads to Andrew Ryan during season 2011

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Charbel Sandroussi, Liver Transplant & Upper Gastro-Intestinal surgeon at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, and Peter Esho, Chief Market Analyst at City Index Asia Pacific, all speak on the network's behalf in a promotional DVD currently in the final stages of production. And heading them up is a bloke who quietly enjoys changing perceptions about what footballers can achieve away from the field of play.

"It has it's plusses and minuses..." he says with a chuckle about the reception he receives from non-football people when they realise what he does for a living. "You know what the funny thing is, I couldn't have had one without the other. I wouldn't have had the opportunities I have had unless I'd played footy. Footy gives me an opportunity to meet lots of people that are interested in the game, but having an education has given me the opportunity to meet lots of people that have been successful in other ways. Between the two, who can't you meet in Sydney – Rugby League is such a massive game, you know?"

Payne turns 28 in 2012 and, in his usual pragmatic style, knows that football won't be around forever. He's already putting plans in place for what he does after his playing career is over, most likely involving studying for an MBA overseas. He says the lessons he has learnt in his playing career leave him uniquely qualified for life ahead - and it's a message he spreads to the students he comes into contact with in his FDN work. It doesn't matter what your background may be, what matters is how hard you are prepared to work, and the opportunities you take. As FDN's mission states, at least in part: to inform, educate and inspire youth from South West Sydney about the importance of attending university.

"This is the way I see it: I've played footy for close enough on a decade plus. What does footy teach you? Work ethic. Working towards goals. Working in teams. Communication. Making sacrifices. Bouncing back from failure. Discipline. All that stuff."

"University study is open to everyone. Further study is something that can be achieved no matter where you come from, what your background is, how much money you've got, where your parents went to university or not. I hate seeing smart people with opportunity set the bar low enough to achieve it, because they're scared of setting it too high that they might fail. There's a saying: 'You miss a hundred percent of the shots you don't take', and it's so true. You've got to put yourself out there and be involved in things, you never know where these opportunities may take you.

"My best piece of advice is if someone's presenting an opportunity to you, take it – you never know where it's going to lead."

For more information about the Future Direction Network, visit www.fdn.net.au.

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