

# Take your best shot

A Kookaburra has hockey in his blood. By Anna Whitelaw

**H**ockey is a family legacy for Chris Ciriello. Growing up in Endeavour Hills, he has been playing hockey since he could wield a stick. His grandfather played hockey for India and coached his father, who played at a high level in Victoria.

"That's how my parents met," Ciriello recalls, "I supposed I could be called a hockey baby."

Ciriello first picked up a hockey stick at 4. By age 16 he had qualified for the under-18 Australian team. "That's when I started to get serious about hockey," he says. At 18, he shed 20 kilograms to "shape up or ship out" for the Australian team. To improve his game, he also moved from his childhood club at Moorabbin to Doncaster Hockey Club to play in the first division men's team.

In 2008 Ciriello was selected for the Kookaburras. "It's scary how fast that has gone," he says.

Being selected meant moving to Perth to train with the Australian side as a full-back.

"I'm a central defender, but I'm also the penalty corner 'flicker', so still score goals," he says.

Playing for Australia is "a huge commitment", the 24-year-old says. "It is more of a lifestyle choice than anything else."

He trains six or seven days a week, often twice a day. Three days a week, he undertakes intensive "stick sessions" on the field with the full squad, and he takes on gruelling gym sessions and works one-on-one with a coach. On top of training, he plays for a club once a week, and also plays for Victoria in the Australian Hockey League, and for Doncaster whenever he can.

Early morning training sessions and frequent travel don't leave much time for a social life. "It is hard to find the balance. When I first came over to Perth, I went out a bit, but you can't really go out when you're training every day."

All the hard work comes at a cost. Stress fractures to his shins kept him out of the most recent Hockey World Cup.

Despite all the hard work, Ciriello still has to

work part-time to make ends meet. "We receive very minimal pay. It's nowhere near enough to live off. It's frustrating because we don't get the kind of money that you would get for playing AFL for example, despite the fact that hockey is Australia's most successful team sport."

Having studied remedial therapy and acupuncture, Ciriello plans to study to become a personal trainer and eventually return to Melbourne after a stint competing in indoor hockey and playing hockey for a club team in Spain next year. Next up, Ciriello will be in training camp, preparing for his first Commonwealth Games, where Australia has high hopes of returning with a gold medal, since the side is ranked No. 1 in the world.

A few weeks later, he has another date with destiny. Next month, he is getting married. His fiancée isn't part of the hockey world. "I always keep work and pleasure separate," he laughs. ■

