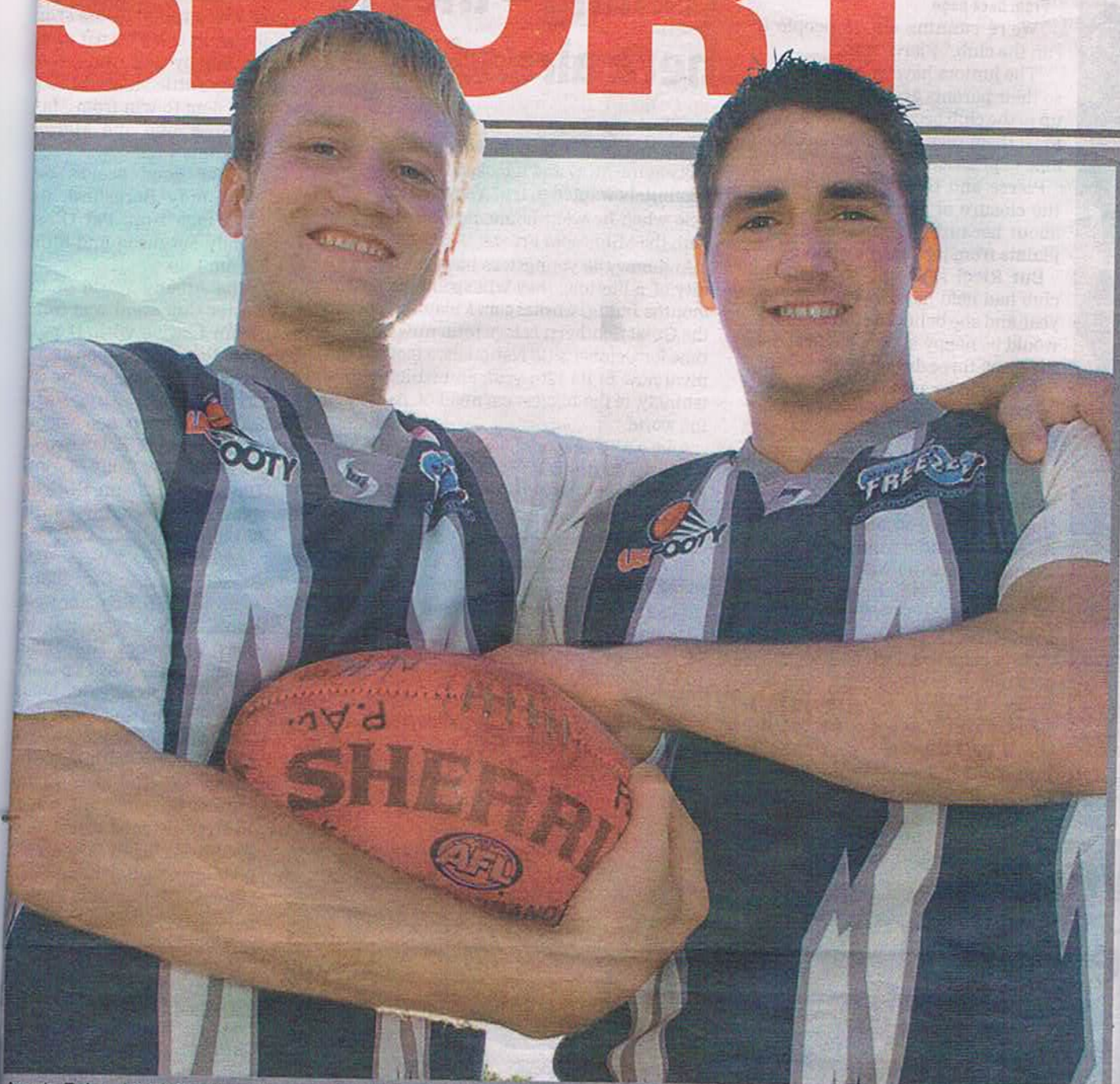


SPORT



Aussie Rules, American style: Minnesota footballers Brent Mergen and Andrew Werner will front each other in this weekend's GSFL match between Denmark and Mt Barker.

The Yanks aren't coming – they're here

By AMBER BRADLEY

THE arrival of two big, burly Minnesota lads in the Great Southern Football League proves our national game has truly gone international.

In a joint initiative of the WA Country Football League and USFooty, Brent Mergen and Andrew Werner arrived on March 29, and will spend the season playing football – Aussie style.

Mergen, 22, has been recruited by the Denmark Magpies,

while 23-year-old Werner will play for the Mt Barker Bulls.

Mergen was introduced to the sport three years ago when he spent a semester living in Fremantle and studying accounting at the University of Notre Dame.

"I was at a bar one night soon after I arrived and splashed all over the TV was this high-paced, exciting game," Mergen said.

"I knew what rugby was, but this was different," he said.

"I acted like a fool and asked a bartender what it was."

Little did he know just a week later, Mergen and his US mates would be introduced to the sport by the South Fremantle Football Club.

And by the time he returned home, just four months later, Mergen was completely hooked.

"It was a combination of all the sports I liked: gridiron, soccer, basketball, volleyball, rugby," Mergen said.

But, according to Mergen, it offered something many other sports don't – continuity.

Mergen took his passion for this newfound, free-flowing game, and established the Minnesota Freeze – St John's University footy team.

Werner, who was Mergen's friend of five years, took up the sport just nine months ago following a stopover in Melbourne to visit his basketball-playing brother.

Continued page 35

The Yanks aren't coming – they're here already

From back page

"We (he and his parents) watched a game of footy at the MCG and it looked like something I definitely wanted to try," Werner said.

So when he went home, he also signed up with the Minnesota Freeze.

And now the youngsters have the opportunity of a lifetime; they will spend the next 12 months living, working and playing footy in the Great Southern before returning home in time for October's US Nationals; a football carnival now in its 12th year, and which, astonishingly, is the biggest carnival of its type in the world.

And while they've been in Australia just three weeks, the boys said being engulfed in the game and the culture had already led to vast improvements in their skills.

"We're playing against guys who've been playing since they were kids, so it's going to take a bit of time," Mergen said.

"The most challenging aspect of the game is kicking, because it's different to a rugby kick or a soccer kick. It's all about hand-to-foot coordination."

And while Mergen made his senior GSFL-playing debut against North Albany last weekend, Werner has his fingers crossed that this weekend will mark his league entrance.