

The Weekend West

It's been a tough journey but Perth Glory star Chris Ikonomidis has finally found the perfect pitch.

WEST WEEKEND

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Road to
GLORY

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NO GUTS NO GLORY

Chris Ikonomidis has won the hearts of Perth soccer fans but the road to Glory has been anything but easy. The young gun tells **Julie Hosking** why he wouldn't change a thing.

PICTURE *JACKSON FLINDELL*



The teenager's hand shot up in an instant. A shy student, Chris Ikonomidis wasn't one to share much in class but when the careers counsellor asked everyone to tell her what they wanted to do when they left school, he didn't hesitate.

"I said 'Oh, I want to be a soccer player', and everyone giggled at me, and she said 'yeah but Chris what do you want your job to be,'" he recalls. "And I said 'no, I want to be a soccer player and make money from that, have that as a career'. And she said 'but no, you have to be realistic: what's your *job* going to be?'"

This less-than-encouraging conversation happened almost eight years ago but it is embedded in the now 23-year-old's mind as if it were yesterday. "It was kind of a moment for me. I thought 'I'm just going to have to go overseas and really go for it now'"

And so it was, at the tender age of 16 and with the full support of his loving family, that he headed to Italy in pursuit of his dreams.

It's a journey that has tested the young Socceroo to his limits, a road paved with homesickness, loneliness and disappointment. But one that he wouldn't change for quids.

IT BEGINS IN THE sun-washed Sydney suburb of Cronulla. The youngest of three children to George and Liz Ikonomodis, Chris describes an idyllic childhood where his dad, a dentist, and mum, a primary school teacher, encouraged their offspring to pursue their passions. Which is just as well, because what Chris loved wasn't exactly de rigueur in his backyard.

"Cronulla is a very Australian beachside town. I grew up as Aussie as they come with all mates into surfing and league," he says. "I was just the odd one out with the long last name — and then I got into soccer."

Like little brothers often do, he followed in the footsteps of older brother Tommy — there's a great

YouTube video of the siblings showing specky ball skills with a wheelie bin — who started playing soccer when Chris was four.

When the team looked like disbanding because they couldn't get a coach, Liz stepped up. She would guide him for the next few years.

"When I was five years old, I finished a game and I said to her 'Mum, I'm going to be a professional player,'" he says. "She reckons from that day she saw the kind of fire in my eyes, she could see how passionate I was and how much I enjoyed it."

Mind you, Chris wasn't exactly enamoured with some of her decisions. "She knew that everyone had to have a turn to go in goal and I hated that because it meant I couldn't run up and score. She'd always dread the day she'd have to tell me but she had to be fair. That's my mum."

Liz laughs when I tell her this over the phone from Sydney. "He was very competitive from a very young age and he always wanted to win," she says. "I always made sure everyone had equal time and he hated coming off and he hated it when it was his turn in goal. But I didn't give him a minute extra than anyone else."

Chris, who had been playing a couple of years ahead of his age group since he was six, was nine when he successfully tried out for the Sutherland Shire representative team. "Some people didn't want him to play up two years in the Sutherland Sharks, they said he was too young," Liz recalls. "But he always went for those things, and he played better when he was challenged with the older kids. He was only up to their shoulders but it didn't worry him."

The Ikonomidis kids seem to like a challenge. Chris tells me Tommy, who gave up soccer to focus on his studies, is also an accomplished musician who's always playing new songs for his little brother — via WhatsApp. "His dream was to become a doctor, so he just started studying a lot more. He's just become a doctor last year. It's been a big year for our family."

Chris' face lights up, as it does whenever he speaks of his family. His older sister Stephanie is a physiotherapist. "They all studied hard, I was the dud," he says with a laugh. "I had to drop out." It wasn't that Chris was a bad student at Cronulla High — Liz says he worked very hard — but it was clear his passion lay elsewhere. "In the back of my mind, I was always thinking 'when can I play,'" Chris says. "Our parents just raised us to believe we could do whatever we want, just do it well."

WE'RE SITTING OUTSIDE A cafe at Claremont Quarter, not far from his new home away from home. He's clearly happy with where he's at and why wouldn't he be?

Chris has settled back in Australia, after six years in Italy. His debut season with Perth Glory has been, well, glorious — scoring eight goals so far and helping teammates to their fair share. (A week after we meet he dislocates his shoulder playing, but is typically upbeat, confident he'll be back on track for the finals.) And his team is top of the Hyundai A-League, securing the premiership just this week for the first time (they won twice in the National Soccer League era), with two games to spare.

And late last year, the striker scored his debut goal for the Socceroots in a friendly against Oman in the United Arab Emirates, ahead of the Asian Cup. His biggest supporters were in the stadium — though whether his mum was watching the whole time is debatable.

"Oh, you should see my mum," Chris says. "When I play Mum faces the other way, she can't watch. She says 'I can't, I feel sick'. If I have to take a penalty she's like 'I can't watch, I'm too nervous'. And my dad can't talk to anyone when he's watching. He just sits by himself like this," he says, holding himself stiffly upright, "and if my brother tries to talk to him he just says 'shut up, I'm watching Chris'. But afterwards of course they are just so, so happy."

As is he. It's a far cry from the lonely, homesick boy who struggled through those first few years in Italy. The boy who was so excited about going overseas to play football that it didn't dawn on him until the night before he left what he might be up against. "I had my going away party with my family and friends and I just couldn't sleep. I thought 'what are you doing, you are going overseas by yourself, to a town you don't know, a language you don't speak, this is going to be hard'" »

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Pitch perfect
Chris has helped Glory (left) to the A-League finals and had a strong Asian Cup for the Socceroos (below).

« His mum knew it would be hard, of course, but she said the decision to let him go to Italy wasn't. "I think it would have been harder to say no because then we would have just kept thinking 'well, what if, we should have let him'," Liz says. "So when he got offered something, we didn't even think about it too much. We knew from an early age that's what he wanted to do."

It was very hard. Bergamo, where he was based, wasn't a big tourist town so no one spoke English, and he wasn't exactly welcomed with open arms by his young contemporaries at Atalanta football club.

"I went into a pool of Italian players my age who are fighting each other for a chance, a very slim chance, to make it into the first team as a professional. They saw me as someone who's going to try to steal the food off their plate. I was a foreigner, so they didn't make it easy for me," Chris says.

"The first two years I didn't speak to anyone, I kind of just locked myself away in my little dormitory room and just kept to myself. I wasn't really getting paid, just a little bit of pocket money, so I couldn't go out to entertain myself."

He'd try to read or watch Italian TV, but would end up spending way too much time alone with his thoughts, replaying his every move on the pitch.

Then there was the distance from home. He only made it back to Australia twice a year, for Christmas and in the middle of the year. Not wanting to upset his family, he tried to downplay his despair but Liz knew he was struggling. "It's very hard as a parent being so far away because you can't fix things. He was very homesick, and he was very lonely."

So what kept him going? "I thought I'm making the biggest sacrifices, I'm missing good years living in Australia ... so I'm going to make it count," he says, some steel coming into his voice. "I thought 'I'm not going to cut corners and not do every single thing I can, or



let a few other players push me around'. That was always my motivation, and it still is now."

When Chris turned 18, life in Italy took a turn for the better. He moved to Lazio, in Rome, and made the most of the bigger club and city. "By then I was speaking a bit more and had more confidence, and I started doing normal things any 18-year-old would be doing." That included meeting an Italian girl, who helped him improve his language skills and encouraged him to get out more.

"I thought I have to immerse myself in the culture and it worked wonders for me because it kind of let me focus on other things besides football," he says. "I think that's crucial for an athlete. As soon as you finish training or the game, just forget about it: Have other hobbies and other passions. And I saw my football was starting to get better, it just went uphill from there."

Still, even as his stocks started to rise, Chris wasn't prepared for the news he received on a train ride home from a training session in 2015. He thought the text message congratulating him on his selection for the Socceroos camp in Macedonia for a friendly against Germany was a joke. "I thought it was a mate trying to wind me up. It was an Aussie number and I just thought 'no, that's not nice'. But it was all true!"

Naturally, the first thing he did was call home. Never mind that it was the middle of the night in Sydney. "I woke them up and they were screaming, they were so happy for me. Because they know all the sacrifice. And all those little milestones, they were the reward." But couldn't you have waited until it was a decent hour in Australia? "No way, no way! They would have got angry if I didn't wake them. Mum always sleeps with her phone with the sound up for if I ever need to call her. I rang from the train and she goes 'what's up Chris, what's wrong?' And I said 'nothing, it's good news'. And I could hear them screaming like here," he says, holding an imaginary phone out to arm's length. "It's great little moments like that I will never forget."

Three weeks later, the then 19-year-old rocked up to camp to meet players he'd dreamt of emulating when he was young. "Tim Cahill was the one I always looked up to. What he was doing on the international stage just gave little boys like me hope, like if he can do it, and he's from Sydney, Australia, then I can do it." And how did he measure up in person? "I was so nervous and intimidated but they were so welcoming. It was the best, to play with them was a dream come true, and it kind of helped my club career as well. They started to take me seriously, 'oh he's 19, and he's already playing for Australia'."

Still, he was yet to stake a permanent claim at a club, with Lazio loaning him out several times, including to Salerno-based Salernitana, when he had a visit from his parents that was memorable for all the wrong reasons. "George and I went over for Chris' 21st and for my 50th, which was in May. He went to play a game and they lost and they weren't allowed to leave Rome," Liz says. "They got put straight into a hotel and they had to stay another week. I don't even think he was allowed to meet us, he just went around the corner from the hotel and we gave him a bag of clothes. But it's like that in Italy. That happened before when my other two children went to visit and a couple of days he couldn't come to see them because he had to stay at the training ground."



Family ties Liz (above with young Chris) was her son's first coach; with his tight-knit family — father George, Liz, sister Stephanie and brother Tommy.

While such experiences were “terrible”, Chris is adamant he wouldn't change the past. Aside from making lifelong friends (he's also now fluent in Italian), it gave him strength of character. “What it's given me as a person and as a player I wouldn't have got had I stayed in Australia,” he says simply. “It was the best move I made, it was the best learning experience and it taught me to grow up so quickly. I find I can cope better with little situations that might deter another 23-year-old.”

CHRIS RETURNED TO AUSTRALIA for an offer that was too good to refuse. And he's not talking about money, though it's a safe bet on current form — and with European clubs now eyeing him off — that Glory would love to sign him beyond the next two seasons. Rather, it was the pitch from new coach, former Socceroo Tony Popovic. “The words he said to me, his evaluation of me, and his belief in me, they gave me goosebumps,” he says. “He said ‘Chris, I can make you a main player in the Socceroos, I can make you enjoy your football, come here and have a season with me and see what happens’. And he has so much respect in the whole community, you can't take stuff like that lightly when a coach of his calibre says that to you.”



His brother, who was studying medicine at UWA, was also talking up Perth, though they would only share a house for a couple of months after Tommy secured a job at a hospital near the family home in Sydney.

Chris' agent Vince Grella, a former teammate of Popovic now based in Italy, also encouraged his young charge to take the leap. “He said ‘this is the best move for you. Go back and enjoy your football, and kind of show Australia what you can do.’”

He's certainly been doing that, relishing his role alongside captain Diego Castro and loving the camaraderie on and off the pitch. “Every day I go to training looking forward to seeing the players, there's such a good atmosphere around the club. We've got an unbelievable team.”

Of course it helps that Glory is on top but Chris puts his own good form down to his state of mind. “Your mental state off the pitch always reflects on the pitch. If you're happy, then you just play better, you're much more relaxed and you make better decisions,” he says. “I used to overthink a lot, over analyse every game. Now I finish training and good, bad, mediocre, I forget about it and move on to the next day.”

His mum is understandably happy to have him back in Australia, even if it is on the other side of the country. They come over when they can, and see his matches in Sydney or Melbourne. “We're just really excited he's having a really good season, and he loves living in Perth,” Liz says. “He really just needed to be playing to show Australia what he can do.”

When he's not at Glory, you are likely to find him at the golf course or having coffee with mates, and he tries to go bodysurfing every day. Yes, the non-surfer from Cronulla has embraced the waves in Perth. Glory fans will also be pleased to hear he's started dating a local girl, increasing his ties to the town, though Chris acknowledges the

difficulties of maintaining a relationship with the uncertainties of his chosen career.

For now, he is focused on helping Glory secure the Championship Trophy next month, hopefully in front of a huge crowd at Optus Stadium on May 18 or 19 should they make it through to the grand final. It would be a great birthday present — Chris turns 24 on May 4.

He's hoping to squeeze in a family holiday at the end of May — they did Alice Springs and Uluru last year, and Chris is keen on Broome for the next — before the Socceroos friendly against South Korea in June. Then comes the major league: helping Australia on the long and difficult road to qualifying for the 2022 World Cup. Chris doesn't want to get too far ahead of himself — he has to be selected first — but he wouldn't be human if he wasn't dreaming of scoring for his country on soccer's biggest stage.

If things don't quite pan out the way he hopes, however, Chris knows where he'll find sanctuary. “My family is my stability in my life. Football goes like this,” he says, waving his hand up and down, “it's a rollercoaster. You can't base your stability on that because you'll never win. So whatever happens in football happens but I know I've always got a tight-knit family. I can always run back to them if I need to, and that helps me a lot. It keeps me grounded.”

His first coach couldn't be prouder. “It hasn't just been him on his own,” Liz says. “He says ‘I do this so we can all enjoy it’ and we've had so many great experiences that people wouldn't even know existed with the journey he's on. It's a real privilege that he wants us to share it with him because we enjoy it as much as him.” **WW**

Perth Glory will host the Hyundai A-League semifinal at HBF Park on May 10. For details on the finals series, and tickets, see a-league.com.au.