

INTRODUCTION

THE ROAD TO UNGARIE

OUR HIRE CAR'S headlights briefly illuminate a sign by the roadside. From the top it reads Ungarie 42, Condobolin 105, Lake Cargelligo 115. A smile creeps across Neale Daniher's face. 'When we see the name Ungarie we know we're almost home.' The outskirts of West Wyalong disappear as the last rays of sunshine fade. It is May 2008. We are in southern New South Wales, 550 kilometres from Sydney and around 600 from Melbourne.

More than six hours earlier, I collected Neale and his teenage son Ben from the family's large home in Melbourne's leafy eastern suburbs. We drove north, passing through Shepparton and the Murray River town of Tocumwal. Discussions flowed, mostly about footy. It was a Monday morning and Neale expressed his relief at not dreading the day, like he had after a loss when coaching Melbourne. Instead, he could watch the season unfold without the stress of having his job continually on the line. He could simply enjoy the game again. Neale had even joined the media. Before we set off he appeared on Neil Mitchell's popular radio program on 3AW, discussing the weekend's results. As it happened, the Demons were the story of the day. Less than 24 hours before, they had staged a remarkable comeback from 51 points down to beat Fremantle at the MCG. Ben was delighted with the result. Despite his dad parting ways with the club, he still loves the Dees.

Over the river, we headed into the wide open expanses of the Riverina. Past Finley, home town of Brownlow Medallist and Hawthorn star Shane Crawford. Once a bustling rural centre, Finley has been gutted by drought, the water shortage drying up the region's rice growing industry. We travelled on to Jerilderie, famous for having its bank held up by Ned Kelly and his gang in 1879. More recently it was the birthplace of Bill Brownless, formerly a Geelong forward, now a professional man of the people. The rumble of giant trucks was constant as we continued north along the Newell Highway to Narrandera, population 6800. 'We used to always think of this as the real big smoke,' Neale remarked as we headed along the main street. Still we drove. Past the Barassi Line, a mythical marker, stretching from south-east New South Wales to the eastern edge of the Northern Territory. The Barassi Line was dreamt up by professor Ian Turner in 1978 to describe the separation of traditional Aussie Rules territory from that dominated by Rugby League.

We continued beyond Ardlethan, where the local footy team once wore an iconic red and yellow jumper with a big star on the front and were called the Stars. The club has since fallen victim to rural population shifts and is now part of a conglomerate mystifyingly known as the Northern Jets. Its guernsey is the same horrid article worn by Port Adelaide in the AFL. A few minutes down the road we flashed past Mirrool, famous for being the place where Brownless kicked a football over a grain silo. And so we arrive at West Wyalong and begin the final stretch.

Neale steers the car around sweeping bends, past pine trees standing so straight they seem made by machine. We reach Girral, a hamlet that once boasted a pub and a footy club. Now it has a couple of grain silos and a tiny collection of weather-beaten houses. Neale, unlike his brothers, never dreamt of being a farmer yet he shifts excitedly in his seat as we turn right and accelerate away from the ghost town. 'From here on is Daniher country,' he says enthusiastically, pointing to the dusty farmland barely visible under the night sky. Sitting in the back seat, Ben offers an opposite reaction. Earphones in, he stares intently at the screen of his laptop. He likes visiting the country but it is not *his* place.

This trip is the beginning of a new journey for Neale. It will be a journey of reflection and, he hopes, discovery. With his father, Jim, about to turn 80, he has decided it is time for the Daniher story to be recorded. The tale will focus on Neale and his brothers, Terry, Anthony and Chris, and their remarkable achievements. The time is right to consider the tremendous opportunities bequeathed by their parents' hard work. Throughout their lives the boys have been doers. Now, more than a decade since Chris, the youngest, retired from the AFL, it is time to take a breath and ponder the mountains they climbed to play football at the highest level. They also hope to shed light on what they know is a deep family history, but it is this aspect Neale approaches with some trepidation. He knows Jim holds the key, however he says their father–son relationship has not involved much in the way of discussion. 'I'm not sure what we'll get out of Dad,' he says. 'He doesn't usually like talking about himself or his boys, doesn't want to be a bighead.'

Soon the car slows again and pulls into Danihers Lane. Tall eucalypts line the road. Every tree, every fencepost, holds a childhood memory. 'We used to do fartlek training here,' Neale recalls while pointing towards a huge gum tree. 'That was one of our stopping points.' A speck of moisture hits the windscreen. Neale winds down the window and thrusts his face into the air. His smile widens. 'It smells like rain.' As he drives along the roughly graded red dirt, he is no longer the one-time Boy Wonder who could have been among Essendon's greatest players. He is not The Reverend, who preached the virtues of the Melbourne Football Club to the masses and almost delivered the Demons a long-awaited flag. Dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, he is simply a bloke from the bush again. And although it is more than three decades since he has lived here, when he pulls up outside the modest farmhouse where he grew up, Neale Daniher is most definitely *home*. 'It's going to be a great few days,' he says, walking towards the front door.

There is a feeling of warmth, of strong family ties, as Edna, matriarch of the Daniher clan, greets us at the door. She is tiny in every way, her voice soft, almost a whisper. She smiles broadly, embracing Neale and Ben, before piling home-grown roast lamb, pumpkin, potato and gravy onto dinner plates. Feeding a sitting of five is a cinch for a

woman who raised 11 children. It is almost 7 pm. Jim sits at the head of the table, keen to start dinner. He is a big man, with broad shoulders, slightly hunched by old age. A full head of white hair is parted solidly and swept to one side. Gnarled hands, resembling often-pruned trees, rest on the tablecloth. They are the souvenirs of a tough life. But in his old age, Jim has a face that radiates a certain friendliness belying his hard-man reputation. 'Good to see you fellas,' he says with his booming voice that knows only one volume. The lamb and vegies are wolfed down. Smiles all round. Edna quietly checks if everyone has enough food and something to drink. Predictably, conversation starts with mention of the weather. 'Oh, she's dry alright, she's bloody dry,' says Jim. He will keep taking an active role on the farm until he can no longer climb out of his chair. Chris now runs the show, having returned to the bush after finishing up at Essendon. A dry start to the growing season has held back the already planted wheat, barley and canola. Jim offers a critique on Chris's approach to farming. 'He's got a bit of bloody crop over here and a bit over there. He loves bloody driving around. We've gone past one paddock four times.'

Jim grins as he talks, his face wrinkling with lines, like Paul Hogan's once did. It seems he loves an audience. Slowly conversation turns to football, to the recent debut of Anthony's son Darcy for Essendon. Then the book is mentioned. And with little prompting, Jim begins passing on his oral history of the Danihers. He talks freely about himself, about playing 'Rules', as the native game is known in New South Wales. About suiting up again on Sundays for Rugby League matches. About the journey of his boys from the outback to the big city. Soon Neale is asking questions. He is being introduced to a new side of his father. Ben listens quietly. Jim will barely take a breath until we head back to Melbourne three days later.

The following day we take Jim for a drive. Remarkably, there is no sign on the outskirts of Ungarie proclaiming the town as 'the home of the Danihers' and Jim likes it that way. First stop is the footy ground, where Terry, Neale, Anthony and Chris began their careers and where Jim ran around for almost three decades. A wide open expanse, it is ringed by a gravel trotting track. The oval is dry, with small patches of green. The tiny brick change rooms are basic to say the least. Battling to

find enough players, the once-mighty Magpies are fighting for survival, their struggle matching that of the local community.

Ungarie is a dying town. We drive along Wollongough Street, its broad thoroughfare lined by disused shops. Just a few cars and the odd ute park under the tall gum trees that cast shade along the middle of the road. The place feels empty. Paint peels from the façade of a store once owned by FR Hayes, a legendary local businessman. At one stage he pretty much ran the town and owned half of it. He opened an ever-popular billiard room that Jim says ‘was the hub of the place’. Written on one shopfront nearby are the words ‘Rick and Sue’s WelcomeMart’. Below the fading letters, the entrance is boarded up. Many locals now purchase their groceries in West Wyalong, while others travel the more than 400-kilometre round trip to shop at the big supermarkets in Wagga Wagga. Some journey north to Condobolin, the outpost that produced *Australian Idol* runnerup Shannon Noll.

We drive slowly past the Town and Country Tavern, painted a deep maroon. Known as the bottom pub, it is a testament to understated 20th century architecture. A large XXXX sign remains atop the small verandah. First licensed in 1935, it closed for the last time in 2006. Colin Baker’s much loved pies and pasties (yes, the baker was a Baker) are also long gone. For Ungarie’s centenary celebrations in 1972, Col handled an order for 14000 hamburger buns. Eight years later his bread oven, first fired up in 1928, began gathering dust.

A few businesses hang on, despite the prolonged drought which threatens to wipe the entire community from the map. A chalkboard outside the Ungarie Butchery advertises minced beef for \$8 per kilo. The Majestic Café stands between two empty buildings and the proprietor still dishes up fish and chips and hamburgers, although the flow of customers is just a trickle. Jim tells us about the times when people would queue at the counter for milkshakes and lollies during intermission at Lampard’s picture theatre. The theatre now stands empty. Back then, floods were the norm. Every couple of years the Humbug Creek would inundate the town. Now the meandering watercourse rarely breaks its banks. Only the Rural Transaction Centre, a one-size-fits-all bank branch, post office and Internet facility, looks alive and modern.

Further up the street, the two-storey Central Hotel watches solemnly over yet another example of Australia's rural decline. Still called the Top Pub even though it's now the only watering hole, it is a substantial red brick building erected in the 1950s when times were good and people plentiful. It has four different Tooheys beers on tap, a dining room and rarely used guest accommodation upstairs. Hardy wheat and sheep farmers and the few other workers left in town gather in the bar to solve the world's problems over middies of New or Old. The publican tries to look on the bright side but admits leasing the Central has not proven to be the smartest of investment ideas. On Wednesday nights a few local footballers might wander in but most weeks only four or five blokes turn up to training.

Ungarie, a place whose history has become indelibly linked with that of Australian football itself, is fading away. Soon it might be just a dusty collection of houses like Girral. From a peak population of 800 it now has just 380 residents. The surrounding district has suffered an even more startling exodus. Out on the land, a whole family was once settled on each 740 acre block. Then, working men were employed to help sow and harvest the crops. Now the average farm is more than ten times the original size. Technology, in the guise of enormous tractors, means a farmer can manage such a vast tract of land on his own.

Jim seems sad at the state of Ungarie, the place where he has lived his entire life. We visit the Catholic primary school, where his sons began their education. Although the weatherboard building is no longer used it sparks many memories. Walking through the overgrown playground, where a couple of goalposts and a concrete cricket pitch can be found, Ben shakes his head. It is like being on another planet, compared to his experiences at the prestigious Xavier College in Melbourne. In just one generation, family circumstances can change enormously.

We leave Ungarie and drive for half an hour to the old sandy ground at Four Corners, where a club existed without a town. Then we travel along bumpy gravel roads to Burgooney, a long-forgotten outpost of Northern Riverina footy. Neale drives, while Jim talks constantly in the front seat, his sentences littered with classic bush humour. He speaks of his father, Jim senior, and tells us he was a renowned

storyteller. He knows the ownership history of every block of land. We are treated to an example of how tough the footy was in Jim's era. 'When a fight started in those days the game would stop,' he says with a chuckle. 'They would form a ring around them and let them fight. Then, when she was over, they'd start the footy off again!'

Finally we visit Tullibigeal, Ungarie's arch-rival on the footy field. Neale played in his only senior premiership there in 1978. He and Ben take out their Sherrin and re-enact some of the game. Later Jim tells them of the politics involved with Neale's selection in the team, because he had been away at boarding school for much of the year. Three generations of Danihers share their history.

When we arrive back at the farm, Edna has laid out some ingredients to make salad sandwiches. She senses it has been a successful and enjoyable morning. Neale continues to ask questions and Jim delights in responding. Edna occasionally chips in, offering some of her countless life experiences. It's like this for the duration of our stay.

Later in the week, when we begin the long trip back to Melbourne, Neale says, 'I didn't know so much of that stuff. Maybe the old man has got to 80 and decided it's no good taking all those stories to the grave.' Maybe he just needed to know someone would listen. Either way, so begins the Daniher story.