

KICKING COUSINS

LOVED BY AUSTRALIAN RULES FOOTBALL FANS AND GOSSIP COLUMNISTS ALIKE, **BEN COUSINS** LAST WEEK GAVE MIDDLE AUSTRALIA A GLIMPSE OF WHAT DRUG ADDICTION CAN DO TO LIVES AND FAMILIES WITH HIS *SUCH IS LIFE* DOCUMENTARY. **KRIS SWALES** EXAMINES THE COUSINS STORY, THE HYPOCRISY OF THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA, AND HOW COUSINS' LIFE MAY HAVE PANNED OUT DIFFERENTLY IF HE ONLY PLAYED A GUITAR.

Two guys walk into a bar. They have a couple of beers, then walk into another bar and have a couple more. Then to another bar for a couple more. A mate summons them to an inner city club where they score some pills, pick up some girls, and dance until dawn. The promoter invites them back to his place, where they snort coke until the sun goes down again and decide to hit the clubs once more. By this time things are messy – they're falling all over each other, have moved onto a new set of girls, and are recognised by some patrons who quickly tweet their location. The guys spend much of the night in a toilet cubicle sharing their stash, and when it runs dry things take a turn for the worse. At 2am they're passed out in a dank corner, so security escort them outside the building where reporters and photographers are now milling.

The next morning their faces are splashed all over the papers, one of them crucified on the front and back pages for letting his fans down, the other glorified in the gossip column for living the dream. The first guy is Ben Cousins, and the second is Pete Doherty.

It's a hypothetical situation, but one that underscores the double standard which separates a guy who laces up a boot from a guy who straps on a guitar – or puts a needle on a record for that matter. If sports stars and rock stars are both considered idols, why does a different set of rules apply to each? And how can the great profession of journalism, which since its earliest days has notoriously been a breeding ground for alcoholics, get up on its high horse to sink the boot into someone dealing with substance abuse problems when its members are far from squeaky clean? Glass

houses and throwing Stones come to mind, and columnists representing the moral majority have been queuing up to express their outrage in a documentary they say glorified drug use.

The Cousins *Such Is Life* documentary was remarkable in that while it showed a man clearly living a privileged life in which everything he wanted was at his disposal if he so desired, his reasons for drug use were the same as any tradie, hair dresser or young executive – as a reward for another successful week navigating the rigours of modern life. But where your average recreational drug user has to up stumps after one night, or one night and one day, or even two days, due to financial constraints and the realities of the working week, Cousins partied on



and on and on much like any rock star worth his salt would if given half the chance.

Cousins isn't the first Australian sporting hero to have his career put on ice by drug use. Dual rugby league/rugby union international Wendell Sailor spent two years on the sidelines when he tested positive for cocaine in 2006, but rebuilt his career on the field before going into a successful media career off it. When *3D World* quizzed Sailor via Twitter on whether it's fair that sports stars are vilified for the sort of excessive behavior that rock stars are glorified for, he was circumspect. "yeah I don't think u can put sports people & rockstars in the same class, u know when u are a athlete what ur role is," Sailor tweeted. "also as a few of us have found out the hard way if u don't play by the rules u are quickly out of a job, & that's the way it is..."

But is it right? Sports stars are just kids when they're thrust into the limelight, making the same mistakes any other kid does as they're trying to make things their way in the world. If Drew Barrymore had been an Olympic swimmer would she have been given the chance to grow into her skin and become the positive influence she is on young girls today, or thrown on the scrapheap by a media hungry for blood? What of the rumours of other Australian football stars past and present whose partying ways are whispered about even outside of the sports' inner sanctum – or the 68 AFL footballers who have tested positive for recreational drugs since 2005, ten who have done so twice? Are you still a role model until you get named and shamed?

Ironically, in the same week that the documentary on Ben Cousins' fall from grace aired, the new album from teen pop idol Katy Perry hit shelves, with lines like "*Infect me with your loving/Fill me with your poison*" no doubt being sung by millions of impressionable young girls around the planet as we speak. If she parties with Cousins on her next Australian publicity trail, the pop idol role model could well become a legend.