

SPOTLIGHT ON JANELLE CUTHBERTSON

KEY DEFENDER FOR
FREMANTLE DOCKERS AFLW



Back in 2019, former tennis player Janelle Cuthbertson stepped out of her comfort zone and thrust herself onto the footie oval. Less than a year later, she was drafted by the Fremantle Football Club. In her second AFLW season she was named in the All-Australian Team of 2021. And today, she's still reigning strong as one of AFL Women's best interceptors.

“ Sport gives people connections and friendships, a common interest, a safe space and a purpose that can be life changing. ”

Give us your bbq pitch. What do you do?

I proudly represent Fremantle Football Club within their AFLW program while also working full-time as Field Services Coordinator at the City of Joondalup. By day, I lead a team of 28 employees in the provision of local laws and regulation and friendly customer service. In the evenings and on weekends, you'll find me on the training track with the Dockers team, preparing for the AFLW season.

Did you always plan to work in this industry?

I started playing tennis and soccer from a very early age. There wasn't much of a career pathway for women in soccer, so I set my sights on becoming a professional tennis player. But I had every intention of getting an education behind me and got a tennis scholarship with Texas A&M University to study a Bachelor of Science, Sports Management.

By the age of 22, I was having some issues with my body and injuries, so I stopped pursuing tennis and focused on finishing my degree. For the next eight years, I worked full-time in sports administration and governance in Perth, including three years working on a development pathway for female players at the WA Cricket Association, and high-performance pathways and systems at Netball WA.

So, how did you get into AFLW?

I didn't start playing AFL until 2019 and was just trying it for fun at first. It turns out I wasn't too bad at it. I ended up getting picked in the 2019 draft, which kickstarted my AFLW career, and then debuted in round one that season. Being drafted was a big surprise and a very special day that will stay with me forever. Right up there with playing the first AFLW Western Derby at Optus Stadium.

How would you describe yourself?

I'm very driven, competitive and, at times, a little ambitious. I love structure and routine and live a life that's closely aligned with my values. My experience balancing high-performance sport with study very early on in my career has really helped me balance a full-time career with a semi-professional sport. I'm also very resilient. I've had more than my fair share of injuries and setbacks, but it only makes me stronger and hungrier to achieve my goals.

What do you love most about the sport industry?

At a community level, sport gives people connections and friendships, a common interest, a safe space and a purpose that can be life changing. Through my admin roles, I've had amazing opportunities to bring sport to low-socioeconomic areas and open doors for young female players too. At AFLW, we have a very special platform to be role models – inspiring young girls and boys to get out there and have some fun free from gender bias.

What's the best part of your role in AFLW?

I've always thrived on pushing myself to see what I can achieve. AFLW gives me that opportunity, together with the incredible support of 29 other athletes and staff which I never had playing tennis. I've learned so much from these girls in such a short space of time. Training and competing as a tennis player was quite lonely. Being part of a team has been an amazing experience and football has challenged me in many different ways, to become a better athlete and a better person too.

What's your best advice for anyone starting out?

Say yes to opportunities, regardless of how big or small they may seem. You'll never have it all figured out, but if you say yes, you'll give yourself a great opportunity to learn as you navigate the challenge.

In sport there can be high pressure and expectations, especially at the elite level, but you don't have to be a serious Sally all of the time. Enjoy it, feed your passion for sport and have fun. Put your best foot forward and make the most of any opportunities.

And what's next for you?

I've never been one of those people with a five-year plan. But I'm always looking to grow, learn, challenge myself and get out of my comfort zone.

Connect with Janelle on LinkedIn

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