

# GETTING THE BALL ROLLING

A footballer buying a pub is yet another modern sport cliché, but Cameron Ling is a team player and has learnt a lot about structures.

STORY: MARK DAVIE  
PHOTOS: SHANNON MCGRATH  
PORTRAIT: COREY SLEAP

*The Pier:  
Cunningham Pier, Eastern Beach Rd, Geelong VIC  
(03) 5222 6444 or [www.thepiergeelong.com.au](http://www.thepiergeelong.com.au)*

## CONTACTS

**Geyer:**  
(03) 9654 3644 or [www.geyer.com.au](http://www.geyer.com.au)  
**WSP Lincolne Scott (AV):**  
(03) 8663 7880 or [melbourne@wsplincolnescott.com](mailto:wsplincolnescott.com)  
**David Couper & Associates (Mechanical):**  
(03) 9763 4699  
**Sonic Lighting (Lighting Supplier):**  
(03) 5277 9977 or [www.soniclighting.com.au](http://www.soniclighting.com.au)  
**Space Furniture:**  
(03) 9426 3000 or [www.spacefurniture.com.au](http://www.spacefurniture.com.au)  
**Koskela (Furniture):**  
(02) 9280 0999 or [www.koskela.com.au](http://www.koskela.com.au)  
**Stylecraft (Furniture):**  
(03) 9666 4300 or [www.stylecraft.com.au](http://www.stylecraft.com.au)  
**Jardan (Furniture):**  
(03) 9548 8866 or [www.jardan.com.au](http://www.jardan.com.au)  
**Hub Furniture:**  
(03) 9652 1222 or [info@hubfurniture.com.au](mailto:info@hubfurniture.com.au)  
**Interdrape (Blinds):**  
(03) 9888 4644 or [www.interdrape.com.au](http://www.interdrape.com.au)  
**Atkar (Acoustic Cladding):**  
(03) 9796 3333 or [enquiries@atkar.com.au](mailto:enquiries@atkar.com.au)



Just to be straight with you. We made him do that. Put on the 'gun show', that is. To his credit, Cameron Ling protested at the idea of posing footy-style in his massive new Geelong venue, The Pier. "You're killing me guys," he said, before being a good sport and tucking his fists into his biceps. As football clichés go it's right up there with 'full credit to the boys', but so is a footballer owning a pub, wouldn't you say?

We've all seen it before. An actor, sportsperson, someone with a high profile gets the idea that if they jump industries, their accumulated goodwill will carry over and sustain their small business in perpetuity. But short of kicking the bucket and erecting a shrine, relying on star power to maintain a steady stream of pilgrims, let alone make enough money to survive, is perilous.

It's a particularly common practise among footballers. After the more obvious post-AFL career choices of coaching footy, commenting on the footy, or writing a book about their experiences in footy, it seems the next most popular choice is to buy a pub. Go figure. Even a couple of Ling's teammates decided hospitality was for them and went into business together without any real experience. The experiment only lasted 12 months before their star faded, and cost them a lot of money in the process.

But this is Cameron Ling. The Geelong Football Club captain, two-time premierships player, and is one of the most recognisable footballers of the modern game. He's also a local boy, born and bred in Geelong, and still lives only a few kilometres down the coast in Jan Juc. If anyone had the chance of capitalising on local affection, surely it has to be 'Lingy'.

## TRANSITION DEFENCE

Why footballers choose hospitality is somewhat of a mystery. I put it to Ling that perhaps it has something to do with having to drink water for most of their career. That footballers become so desperate for a drink they overdo it and buy the pub instead of just drinking at it.

Ling has a different insight: "Being in a footy club, you must have a personality, and be friendly. Each year 50 blokes are living in each other's back pockets. You learn to get along with people. For some that enjoy going out and have a friendly personality, maybe hospitality is worth having a go at. Though of all the guys at the footy club there'd only be a couple that it would suit. But then there are a couple of obvious ones who should go into coaching, a couple who'd go into the media, and then there's a couple who've got no idea what they should be doing, and I've got no idea what they should do either!

"I didn't make a conscious decision to get into hospitality. It evolved. I enjoy meeting people and socialising, why not have a crack at trying to make some money from a business that caters to my strengths? I'm smart enough to know I'm not a chef or a wine expert, so I trust in the people who work here to serve a really good quality product that people are going to want to come back for."

## ABOVE THE PACK

Emerging from the pack of footballers that do have a crack at the hospitality game, there has been one or two that have managed to make a good fist of it. Nick Reiwoldt hasn't done too badly for himself with venues like the Waterside Hotel in Melbourne faring well, and Luke Darcy also has a strong portfolio. "The common denominator is they got themselves in with really good people," said Ling. "People they could trust, knew really well, and had experience in the business. It's a different



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industry. There are little things that I had no idea about that I would have just skimmed over, lost or cost me money.”

In Ling’s case, the other main team players are Darren Holroyd and Dominic Tripodi, who have decades of hospitality and ownership experience between them. “I got into hospitality mainly through Darren,” said Ling. “We’ve known each other for about 15 years now. I used to work for him at one of his places back when I was a teenager. We caught up a couple of years later as I started playing footy and threw around the idea of going in together. We both agreed that we wouldn’t rush into anything and be the typical footballer buying a pub, run it for six months using your name and then lose all your money on it. We’d find something in the right spot that would really work long term.

“If people think the food’s no good or the venue is no good, who cares if a footballer owns it? They’re going to stop going. I wanted it to stand on its own two feet.”

Aside from The Pier, Darren and Dominic are also his partners at The Edge, a new-build corner restaurant and bar on the Geelong foreshore (which was Ling’s first), and Newtown’s Gold Diggers Arms Hotel, which is a traditional hotel the group are determined to bring back to its glory days.

Ling again: “We looked at a heap of places over the years, it was probably seven or eight years of research before the opportunity to take The Edge came up and we jumped at that. We thought, “that’s the location we’re after, we can really do something that works.” We went through the whole process of dealing with the landlord, getting the lease done, the planning, and working with Geyer — it was a great experience for me. I was really proud of that first one and it just fuelled the fire.”

SMORGASBORD OF SPACES

The Pier used to be called Smorgy’s, a smorgasbord diner at the tip of Cunningham Pier on Geelong’s foreshore. In its heyday, it would draw crowds of schoolkids trying to eat their weight in roast beef and fresh-fried cinnamon doughnuts, and parents grinning and bearing the hourly animatronic dinner show comprising Salty the Seal and his jaunty choir of maritime maties. It was a local attraction, but to many it was a waste of a prime real estate. “For that whole 15 years everybody looked at it and said, ‘I’d love to get my hands on Smorgy’s and turn it into something it should be.’” Said Ling. So when Smorgy’s came up for sale, despite their recent expansion, it wasn’t even a question whether they would take it or not. “It’s the best spot in Geelong, we couldn’t let the opportunity pass.”

The Pier was designed by Geyer, and now features four high-class hospitality venues: The Pier event space; Baveras fine dining restaurant; City Quarter boutique bar; and The Dock Café & Chippery. Salty the Seal was sent packing — he now holds court at Jirralingah Wildlife Park on the Bellarine Peninsula — and his old habitat is barely recognisable, the only thing left is part of the kitchen and the views. The large function and smaller Baveras kitchens are co-located, forming the hub of The Pier with the four spaces spinning off of it.

Geyer also worked on the Edge, which got the owners thinking about whether it was the best decision to use the same designers again. But results speak for themselves, and Geyer’s ability to bring sophistication to the regional city of Geelong without overstepping the mark at the Edge was again required at The Pier.

“The one thing we had to be aware of with such a big space was cost. Whatever we were going to get in was going to keep adding up because of the size,” said Ling. “We had to limit the cost but we also wanted a quality finish, which was the challenge for Geyer. It’s classy but it’s also comfortable enough that people are going to enjoy it. I mean we are Geelong, you can’t go too classy because people won’t come. But we do want a level of quality.”

You might be forgiven for thinking the local boy’s constant switch between ‘we’ as in The Pier, and ‘we’ as in the greater city of Geelong, is egotistic. As if to say his venue is representative of the wider city. But it’s really an endearing combination of team spirit and a sense of belonging fostered in footy that blurs the distinction. For comparison, you have to equate his inseparable identification with Geelong to a footy supporter saying of his team: ‘We’ played well on the weekend.

DEFINING ROLES

Before getting Geyer to come in and work their magic, the owners engaged architect Andrew Tucker to help them define the spaces, which included the installation of the central feature staircase leading straight up to the City Quarter Bar from The Pier.



Bottom: Baveras (left), City Quarter (right)

Each of the four venues was always intended to be separate, with distinct entrances for each. And while most venues try to create delineations in a space while maintaining the connection between them, The Pier’s stand-alone approach works really well, probably because not one of the venues is without a view.

“Without doubt the best part of the location is the 270-degree view of water,” said Geyer’s Dana Hutchins of the breakup. “Everything has been planned with an eye to the views. It’s not dissimilar to designing offices. Everything was built to a core in the middle, being the kitchen and the private dining areas, which allows you to plan to the views right around the exterior.”

WATERMARK

Although the water views are spectacular, Geyer opted not to use water as a key inspiration in the design — ditching Salty as well as an aquarium the size of the private dining room. “We looked more at the history of The Pier,” said Hutchins, citing Cunningham Pier’s importance to the local wool industry as contributing inspiration for Baveras’ textures. “There was always a high benchmark set for Baveras, with the desire to one day gain a couple of hats for the food. In that way, it was always intended to be the jewel in the crown. It was all about craftsmanship — the floors are all oak parquetry, rattan chairs, and plaster board mouldings. The City Quarter bar is plush, but with artisan pieces like macramé hanging baskets, while the curtains are woven with some gold. And The Dock Café & Chippery is more industrial.

“There’s not as much detailing in the function areas, because people will typically dress them up, but a lot of money was spent on making it acoustically sound. With 700 people in there it can be quite a substantial voice load on the space. There are a lot of acoustic treatments to get the space comfortable. We used screenwood in the ceiling, and all the walls are clad in an acoustic product from Atkar.”

MAJOR FUNCTION

The function space occupies most of the area previously inhabited by the old Smorgy’s dining room. As a major part of the whopping 1000sqm tenancy, it’s the biggest function centre in Geelong. And with Ling’s ties to the footy club it also sees a lot of the Cats’ business.

“The footy club found it hard,” said Ling. “Anything over 450-500 tended to go to Melbourne because there was just nowhere big enough. It’s still not quite big enough for our Best and Fairest at the end of the year. That’s about 1500 — we couldn’t quite squeeze that one in. Though it would have been nice. We’re lucky we’ve got this view and this location, which adds to it as well.”

“It’s pretty versatile. There are a few function centres in Geelong, but none of this size or as versatile in the way it can split into different sizes. It can sit down 750 around tables and about 1000 standing up.”

SEACHANGE

Ling is obviously more than just a footy player, but for now he’s still a really good one. Which begs the question, now that he’s got a stable of venues, will they ease the pain of transition from his footy life?

“As for how long I decide I’ll play footy for, I’ll finish up either this year or next year,” he said. “Mentally I still love it. I’m so motivated. And I feel really good at the moment, but it’ll just be the body not being able to do what I want it to or used to be able to do. Maybe I have one more year. Who knows?

“The Pier gives me more direction, it makes finishing up a little less scary — instead of doing this one thing for 15 years then not knowing what to do. It’s not to say I’m going to jump into being the bar manager because others can do a lot better job, but I’ll slowly be able to get more involved.

“There are a lot of other things I want to do, like eventually get into coaching footy. Whatever it might be I’ve always said I might have 12 months away from footy and if I miss it like crazy then I’ll want to jump back in and do the coaching. If I don’t miss it then obviously it’s not right for me to go back. I’ll just wait and see.”

Whatever the case, with The Pier and The Edge within drop punt distance of the Geelong waterfront, Ling has positioned himself well for years to come. Ling: “Geelong’s population is about 280,000 now, and it’s growing pretty quick. They’re putting the new super-suburb Armstrong Creek between Southern Geelong, Torquay and Barwon Heads, it’s going to have 50,000 people living there in 10 years. But I think it still needs a central point where everyone loves to go, which will hopefully be the waterfront.” With those views, you expect it will be. venue