

CEDRIC the ENTERTAINER

JACKIE EPSTEIN

FROM the club that once tried to convert an Ethiopian refugee from basketball to ruckwork. That gave a couple of Japanese midfielders a run in an intra-club match. That persisted with a muscular gridiron player running around trying to get a kick in its reserves.

Now Essendon believes it may have unearthed a rare prospect in a Melbourne-born Mauritian who is a beach volleyball champion.

Cedric Legrand, 20, who runs 100m in 10.78sec and has a 105cm leap, has barely played a game of Australian football.

But last month he met Bombers list manager Adrian Dodoro and the club is keen to help the exciting Legrand make it in AFL ranks.

"I definitely want to give it a crack," said the 189cm Legrand, a former Mazenod student who now works in the insurance industry.

"I just love the physical part of footy — the tackling, the running, the chasing. I'll tackle it head on and just go hard at it. I just chase and run and follow the footy... it would be the opportunity of a lifetime."

Legrand is the national under-23 beach volleyball champion and is part of the indoor volleyball team for Heidelberg and Victoria.

His precocious talent was noticed by volleyball manager Mahmoud Fahour, whose brother Ali used to play with the Bendigo Bombers and now plays at West Preston.

"Last year I was looking for potentials and he was just a standout," said Fahour, who has organised an ambassador role for Legrand with Adam Ramanauskas's Fitdeck business.

"I saw this athletic ability and thought what a waste in volleyball. The reason I went to Essendon is because my little brother was there and I know they like to look outside the square."

"Adrian said he wanted him to play for Strathmore, where Paul Barnard coaches, but he wants to finish off this volleyball season first."

"It would be an amazing story for someone of his age and background. He really is a unique talent — I can see him taking mark of the year with that leap."

Legrand's father, Nelson, played volleyball for Mauritius while his three younger brothers — Denzell, Tyler and Cooper — are also promising sportsmen.

"I was about 12 when I started following footy and Collingwood was winning a lot then so I just went for them," Legrand said.

"I love (Ben) Cousins, back in the day he was a gun. And I love watching Bryce Gibbs, I think he's a gun as well."

"The (differences in) fitness levels between football and volleyball are just massive, but I've got good endurance and speed. Since I could walk I've played volleyball."

"A few AFL players have also



Picture: ALEX COPPEL

played, like Ashley Hansen, David Hille and the Clokes. I just really want to give footy a go."

Essendon has long held a reputation for its innovative recruiting. American gridiron player Dwayne Armstrong made it to reserves level; Ethiopian athlete Goaner Tutlan impressed at summer training; while Australian

discus champion Werner Reiterer and Japanese footballers Michito Sakaki and Tsuyoshi Kase took part in pre-season training.

The Bombers championed the push to recruit footballers from the Northern Territory, and in particular the Tiwi Islands.

And the club has Irishman Michael Quinn, 19, on its books — he played

his first game in Round 2 after landing here only five months ago.

Former coach Kevin Sheedy has always pushed for football to embrace international talent.

Next month he will head to China and explore the reach of Aussie football.

"Wouldn't it be fantastic to have a guy from Mauritius playing our great game," Sheedy said.

ESSENDON PROJECT PLAYERS

MICHAEL QUINN — Ireland

Recruited from Killoe, in the heart of Ireland, he was listed as an international rookie, then elevated to the senior list when Scott Gumbleton was injured. Has since played two senior matches.

DWAYNE ARMSTRONG — US

Former American football player who had a stint in the reserves from 1996 and later became the NFL development manager for Australasia.

GOANER TUTLAN — Ethiopia

Four years after arriving as a refugee in Australia, trained with Essendon's development squad in 2004, and impressed with his athleticism and pace. Ended up playing with St Mary's in the NTFL.

MICHITO SAKAKI and TSUYOSHI KASE — Japan

Did pre-season training in 2005. with Michito playing in an exhibition game against Sydney at North Sydney Oval. Now helping to run football clinics in Japan, hoping to convert youngsters to Australian football.

FOREIGN-BORN DONS

CHARLIE MOORE — Fiji

The first VFL player to die in active service, he was killed in the Boer War in 1901. Had played 30 games for Essendon including the 1898 Grand Final and was the club's leading goalkicker that season.

JACK BAGGOTT — South Africa

After a couple of premierships with Richmond, became Essendon's captain coach in the late 1930s.

PETER BENNETT — New Zealand

After coming across from Hawthorn, "Scrubba" Bennett played 67 matches for the Dons, and was ruck-rover in the 1981 night premiership.

DANIEL McALISTER — New Zealand

A rugby player as a junior, he was drafted at No. 5 in the 1996 draft, and went on to play six AFL games over as many seasons.

MAL MICHAEL — Papua New Guinea

After stints with Collingwood and the Brisbane Lions, came out of retirement to join the Bombers in 2007.

DAMIAN CUPIDO — South Africa

Born in Cape Town, and recruited from the Brisbane Lions, Cupido was a skilled forward who battled injury through his 50-game career between 2003-05.

African program unearths talent

THE AFL has urged clubs to "get creative" with their recruiting model next year and tap into exciting, raw talent in South Africa.

The AFL is prepared for a major breakthrough in its South African experiment, having identified a handful of players considered worthy of a place on an AFL list.

They include 19-year-old national team representatives Bayanda Sobetwa, an electrifying half-forward from Western Cape, and Thabiso Phakedi, a super-quick midfielder from the northwest.

JAY CLARK

AFL youth and high performance co-ordinator Jason McCartney says the impending draft concessions to Gold Coast and possibly West Sydney in the next few years will test the depth of young Australian talent. McCartney said there was never a better time for clubs to look abroad and invest in some of the 20,000 players playing the game dubbed Footy Wild in South Africa.

"With Gold Coast and maybe West Sydney coming in and getting a lot of

the best talent, there really is an opportunity for clubs to get creative, because there are some players with some enormous potential over there in South Africa," he said.

"It's a bit like a needle in the haystack finding them, but we've been building and identifying the talent over some time now with some exciting results."

"We'd like to think, in the short-term, we can get one over the line in the next year."

"But we have only just scratched the surface. If we could put a lot of

the younger players through some academy-style training, we would have South African players on lists everywhere."

McCartney said there had been some exciting developments in the past three weeks in talks with chiefs from other South African elite sporting bodies.

He said it was realistic to think the AFL could help turn fringe rugby players and other athletes into top Australian footballers.

"They've already got the physical attributes, and, with some high-

performance training, you can make that crossover," McCartney said.

The AFL has slashed the cost of signing an international player under its scholarship program to \$1000.

Clubs can sign up to eight players from other countries, besides Ireland, and let them develop overseas or move them to Australia for a \$20,000 fee to the AFL.

"Like the New South Wales scholarship program; if you can find one, it's really like a free hit," McCartney said.