

# Introduction



*Sport has been our greatest ally — Michael Long<sup>1</sup>*

In early 2005, seven men and a voice came together in a room. They were there to discuss the selection of the Australian Football League's (AFL) Indigenous Team of the Century. The team would be announced in August of that year. In the room was media personality Ernie Dingo, former umpire Glenn James, Essendon coach Kevin Sheedy, AFL National Talent Manager Kevin Sheehan, senior journalists Mike Sheahan and Michelangelo Rucci and AFL statistician Col Hutchison. The voice belonged to lifelong footy fan and Yawuru statesman Pat Dodson. Dodson could not be there because he was in Western Australia filming *Liyarn Ngarn*, a documentary with the late English actor Pete Postlethwaite and Guditjmarra musician Archie Roach which was released in 2007. The documentary was about the 1992 murder in Perth of Indigenous man Louis St John Johnson, who was killed on his nineteenth birthday. He had been set upon by four non-Indigenous youths who bashed him, ran him over in their vehicle and left him for dead. Johnson was found several hours later by paramedics. They assumed he had been drinking and sniffing petrol. The paramedics took Johnson home and he died there some time later from massive internal bleeding after being advised to 'sleep it off'.

As the selectors pored over the list of players, the feeling in the room and down the line was a positive one. After several hours, the meeting wound up and the men in AFL House went their separate ways. They bid farewell to Dodson who had to get back to filming. In Western Australia, Dodson emerged from where he had conducted the teleconference to join Roach, Postlethwaite and the others involved in the filming, for a cup of tea. Everyone in the room was interested in the selection of the AFL's Indigenous Team of the Century. 'How did it go Pat?' someone asked. 'It went well,' said Dodson. 'But you know

who I really think should play in the centre? Terra Nullius,' Dodson boomed. 'Why?' someone asked nervously. 'Because every time he gets the ball he just disappears. One minute he is here and the next he is gone!' There was a brief pause and then the room burst into laughter.



In 1992, I began a journey. Having finished a stint in the country where I had been working on farms and in shearing teams I re-entered high school as a mature age student on advice from a friend. I was 23. Doing my Year 12 again was a good way to get used to the rigours of study and at the end of it I needed to make a choice. I had to tick a box as to which university course I wanted to do. After twelve months I still had no real idea. At Murdoch University in 1993, for the first time, a degree was offered in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. I ticked the box and in that moment my first step was taken. I have been asked many times why I chose the degree I did. I still don't know why I ticked the box, but I can honestly say that through that simple action, and having worked with Indigenous Australians since then, my life has been enriched beyond any measure.

It seems like the blink of an eye, but eighteen years later I am still working and studying in the same field I began in. More importantly, I am still learning. The learning process has not been easy as many of the issues left me numb because of how profoundly disturbing they are. My initial shock and anger on learning about the issues that confront Indigenous Australians remains today. How could it not? I am still dismayed that the life expectancy of Indigenous Australians remains the worst of any developed country. I am still deeply saddened by the treatment of Indigenous peoples across all sectors in Australian society, and I am angered that many non-Indigenous Australians have very strong opinions about Indigenous Australians despite barely having ever spoken to a 'blackfella', or having read a single book on the issue.

The counter-balance to this is that I have always been a strong follower of the Indigenous game, Australian Football. The reasons for my love of 'the game' are many and varied but at the heart of it is something quite simple: it speaks to me. What I have come to appreciate is that many non-Indigenous Australians' only positive engagement with Indigenous peoples is by watching football on TV or being at the game. Blackfellas make up nearly twelve per cent of the playing stocks in the elite AFL, while the Indigenous population in Australia is only two per cent. Surely this says something about 'our game' and how it speaks to blackfellas. Surely it offers a key to bridging the gulf between 'us' and 'them'. I have seen with my own eyes how football clubs can help engage and

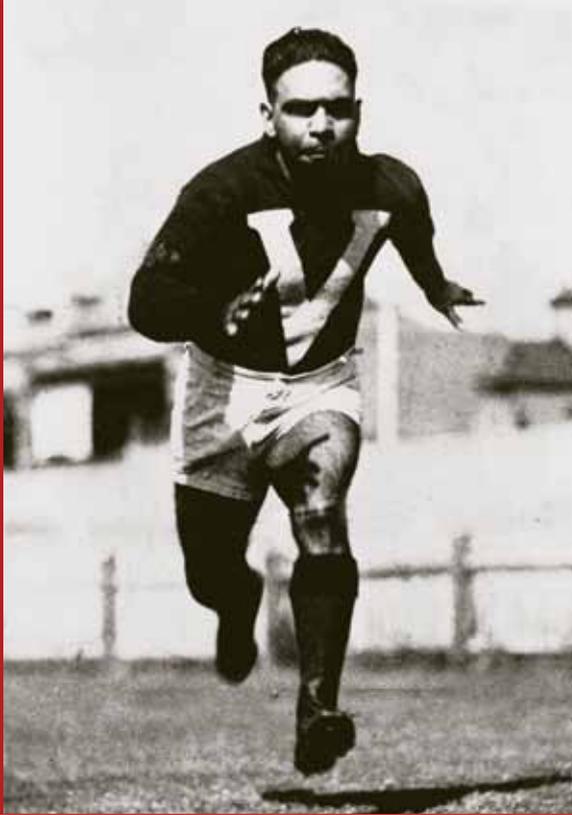
heal communities. I have witnessed the redemptive power of football for both black and white Australians. It is through this social process that people come together and communicate, and that can create rapport. Rapport builds trust. Trust builds hope.

For me, football stories provide us with a starting point for other conversations. I consider this incredibly important because the role that sport has played in Australian history shows us something about Indigenous struggle in Australia. I firmly believe it is through stories about Indigenous Australians that people can begin to reconsider other areas where Indigenous people have enriched and contributed to Australian society.

A ‘light-bulb’ moment came when I was interviewing renowned AFL and Essendon champion, Michael Long, for this project. His quote, which appears at the top of this chapter, ‘Sport has been our greatest ally’ drove home to me that without sport perhaps Indigenous peoples’ welfare and wellbeing might be worse than it is currently. For me, this is a powerful statement. It is powerful because Long himself had to stand firm amongst great public and media criticism in 1995. In this way, football enabled him to navigate complex issues and explain why he made the stance he did at the time. Football gave him the chance, and the voice, to speak out against prejudice.

In many respects, the Indigenous struggle on the football field is one that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians experience every day. The struggle could be epitomised by the indelible image of Nicky Winmar’s defiant reply to a hostile Collingwood crowd in 1993. This, combined with Long’s stance, has enabled Australia to look at racism at many levels, as a nation. But there have also been less notable struggles. For example, in the 1930s, Pastor Doug (later Sir Douglas) Nicholls was essentially turned away from Carlton as the trainers refused to touch him, presumably thinking he was dirty and not up to Victorian Football League (VFL) standards. Jim Krakouer was suspended for a total of twenty-five games, over a season’s worth, due to retaliating to the racialised verbal and physical attention shown to him and his younger brother Phil in the 1980s. During their playing careers, West Coast Eagles players Chris Lewis and team-mates Phil Narkle and Troy Ugle received anonymous death threats and hate mail. The vitriol was so disturbing that the West Coast Eagles sought counselling support to help these players cope.

In many respects the struggle has come down to what the colour of a person’s skin has represented. The history of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations has a long and difficult past, and we are still grappling with it today. Academic Colin Tatz believes this is a matter of history and our perceptions of it:



Pastor Doug Nicholls was essentially turned away from Carlton as the trainers refused to touch him presumably thinking he was dirty and not up to VFL standards.

Sir Pastor Doug Nicholls. Courtesy Colin and Paul Tatz.

The phrase from ‘plantation to playing field’ expresses the history of Black American sport...Aboriginal history has been the reverse. They went from relative freedom, albeit in an era of genocide, to the isolated and segregated settlements and missions which were created to save them.<sup>2</sup>

At AFL matches across the country today, large electronic screens broadcast a pledge to all patrons that racial vilification at the ground will not be tolerated and, if it occurs, will result in a substantial fine and ejection from the arena. However, it does not seem all that long ago that Indigenous players were able to be abused for the colour of their skin. Since 1990, when the VFL transitioned in to the AFL, the game has had many challenges, but racial vilification presented itself differently compared to the myriad financial and administrative issues that the new, expanded national competition faced. It seems that vilification was seen as an intrinsic part of the game and was used in the psychological struggle with opponents. The AFL’s Rule 30, the racial and religious anti-vilification law, states:

*No person subject to these Rules shall act towards or speak to any other person in a manner, or engage in any other conduct which threatens, disparages, vilifies or insults another on the basis of that person's race, religion, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin.<sup>3</sup>*

For many people at the time, the ethos was 'what was said on the field stayed on the field.' It was a rationalisation to get an edge over an opponent, and if Aboriginal players could not take it they were 'weak'. Today this notion is preposterous, as racist behaviour has no place in sport or the broader society.

To try to get some measure of it, we could try to imagine what the sporting landscape would be in Australia if Indigenous Australians did not play Australian football. For example, Indigenous participation in international cricket is virtually non-existent. Jason Gillespie, a Kamilaroi man from New South Wales, is the only test cricketer to have played for Australia who identifies as Indigenous.

Because of Indigenous Australians' love of Australian football, Indigenous participation in football has become a highly celebrated aspect of the Australian game. It is because of players like Nicky Winmar, Barry Cable, Michael Long, Chris Lewis, Byron Pickett, Polly Farmer, the Krakouer brothers and many others, that football is a space where both the positive and negative historical issues of race relations in Australia can be investigated. In this way football ceases to be just a game but becomes a teacher, and through its lessons we may become, as Australians, a better team.

## **SPORT, HISTORY AND POLITICS**

For many Indigenous Australians, sport, history and politics have become intertwined because of issues concerning wider societal struggles and the oppression they have experienced. Over time, many Indigenous athletes had to adapt to politics and policies in order to survive, as financial and social self-determination were not accessible. Academics like Anna Haebich and Colin Tatz have shown that in the late 1800s and early to mid-1900s, rations, curfews and reserve life created massive everyday hardship and poverty. As Tatz sees it, those who displayed ability in sport were able to supplement their seasonal incomes and rations with semi-professional foot races or boxing matches. This allowed them to become more socially mobile and gain a begrudging acceptance and status in the broader community.

This rich historical vein of sport, race and history, is not adequately appreciated by many non-Indigenous Australians, which is surprising given the status