

Eradicating racism in the Australian football league

[Sociology](#), [Racism](#)



Racism is a malady faced by every nation in the world, and despite government regulations working towards alleviating race relations, it is a problem which has permeated into many facets of society, including schools, workplaces and sports. One of the minority groups facing the biggest hurdles in Australian history has been the Aboriginal community; since the arrival of Europeans over two hundred years ago, the indigenous peoples of this country have struggled for land rights, voting rights and the right to be treated equally in a social setting.

Although Aboriginal men and women have had many great achievements in sporting competition during the last century, these athletes have faced racial prejudices and biases from other players, officials and administrators. For many years, the only thing that Aboriginal footballers were known for was their rarity. In the last twenty years, the Australian Football League has made great strides towards the creation of a "level playing field" so that both races can participate in harmony.

These efforts have not gone unnoticed or unappreciated by the Aboriginal people; in fact, some believe that it will be completely egalitarian within the next generation of footballers. Starting from behind The unfortunate reality of the Indigenous communities in Australia is that they are stereotypically less economically privileged and are unable to provide their residents the same opportunities that many white areas offer. From an athletic standpoint, this means that their children grow up without the chance to practice on a proper field, play games without jazzy uniforms and learn from the best coaches money can buy.

They mature without as many same-race role models as the white children and have far more hurdles to jump over. In spite of all these disadvantages, those that are graced with natural sporting prowess have broken into the Australian sporting scene. The sports today that Aboriginals are usually participants in are rugby, Australia Rules Football, boxing, and track and field events. When contrasting these sports with such ones as cricket and rowing, it becomes obvious that the Aboriginal participation is almost entirely limited to "stadium sports" rather than "club sports."

They are the events that are considered more ruthless and brutal. In some ways, there is an over-representation in sports; approximately one percent of the Aboriginal population has produced fifteen percent of Australian boxing champions. The strength in participation in the gladiator-like sports enhances the idea that the Aboriginal community ought to be valued for its brawn instead of its brains. In the Australian Football League (AFL), Aboriginals have faced racism from all angles, despite being some of the best athletes on the field.

Facing Racism: The three forms of racial prejudice seen in the AFL There are three distinct types of racism which have poisoned the AFL: individual, overt institutional and covert institutional racism. The one that persists and will be the hardest to erase are the covert institutional prejudices. Because there has been a historical trend to ignore and bar Indigenous people from participating in sports, there are very few role models for Indigenous people in sports, although they surely do exist. This tendency continues today, as clubs fail to recruit as many Aboriginal players.

It can require more effort to seek out these gifted members of society, and by not encouraging or helping Aboriginal communities to develop, the League looks away from rising stars. The lack of recruitment of Aboriginals is considered covert because it is not outrightly rejecting them from participation. Additionally, the lack of indigenous people in positions off the field is shocking. There are nowhere near as many indigenous men and women in coaching, managing, or administrative positions as there are white men and women.

Additionally, under the false premise of protecting citizens, the government has even gone so far as to ban Aboriginal protests, aimed at exposing their mistreatment and the government's continual abuse, at sporting events, like during the 1982 Commonwealth Games¹. The covert institutional prejudices are nowhere near as offensive as the overtly racist actions taken by some AFL organizations, though. In the early 1920s, Doug Nicholls was one of the first Aboriginal men to use football as a way to "escape mission life."² At the encouragement of a Victoria Football League Scout, he left his town, Cootamundra, which had become a Christian mission, for Melbourne, where he tried out for the Blues. The players did not want an Aboriginal on the team, and Nicholls shortly left, dejected, upon being informed that he smelled. It wasn't until 1935 that he became the first Aboriginal in the VFL, for Fitzroy.

He went on to become the first Aboriginal Knight of Australia, amongst other achievements. The blatant racism he faced is exemplary of the means of overt institutionalized racism faced over the years by indigenous players,

which they are overcoming with the help of national and AFL legislation.

However, what really caused the public to sit up and take notice of the racial problems in the AFL were the actions of individuals. Ignorant and threatened, white players have used racial slurs as a way of taking the upper hand in the mental aspect of a football game. The abuse extends above the field, when opposing fans join in the taunting over skin color and ethnic background.

One player who really felt the heat of this mistreatment was Robert "Mad Dog" Muir, a St. Kilda player in the late 1970s of Aboriginal descent. It's unfortunate that he has gone down in history not for his incredible reflexes or marking skill, but instead, he is known for his quick temper and physical violence. One commentator has remarked that his aggressive nature "outshadowed his ability." ⁴ His violent acts of kicking, punching, head butting and beating both his teammates and opponents lead to so many suspensions that he only played in 20 senior matches from 1977 to 1984.

He has stated "some of my suspension time comes from racial comments... it's been going on for years." ⁵ Perhaps the worst offender was Allan McAlister, former Collingwood president, who made public statements in 1993 that Aboriginal people were welcome at his club if they behaved like white people. Realizing his mistake, he retracted it, saying they didn't need to behave like "white folks," but like "human beings." ⁶ Striking Back: Aboriginal players stand up A textbook example of an Aboriginal standing up to the jeers of players and spectators was in the 1993 game between St.

Kilda and Collingwood, when Nicky Winmar made a silent statement to the world. As the sound of the buzzer marked a Saints victory, Winmar lifted his jersey over his head and pointed to his skin. According to the Saints' website⁷, the message was clear: " I'm black and I'm proud. " This was one of the turning points for indigenous players and fans, setting off a whirlwind of controversy. Lifting his head above the rest, fellow Aboriginal Michael Long picked up where Winmar left off.

In 1995, Essendon player Michael Long lodged a landmark complaint against Collingwood's Damien Monkhorst for the Magpie's excessive use of racial slurs. Monkhorst eventually apologized, and this is considered the first official act of reconciliation in the AFL, in the area of racist abuse. According to the AFL, the Long-Monkhorst matter was resolved in mediation, but it was this case that triggered the organization to create and enforce an official policy to deal with " racial and religious vilification. " ⁸ The Official Policy and Reaction

According to AFL Rule 30, " a rule to combat racial and religious vilification," the following behavior is prohibited. " No person in his capacity as an employee of a Club... shall act towards or speak to any other person in a manner, or engaged in any other conduct which threatens, disparages, vilifies or insults another person on the basis of that person's race, religion, color, descent, or national or ethnic origin. " ⁹ Also outlined are the ways in which a person can complain and a requirement of confidentiality (including not speaking to the press) surrounding the issue.

There are penalties of \$20,000 for the first offense, required counseling/education sessions, and other deterrents in place to combat racism on an official level. The organization was given the Victorian section of the Australian Reconciliation Award in the business and industry section. 10 The new rule was publicized by the AFL by the distribution of a brochure outlining the rule. They also broadcasted a television commercial, calling attention to the racial problems in Australia and stating that any form of racial abuse was just not acceptable.

Their actions did not end on the professional football field, though. In 1996, the AFL created a study group to focus on football development in Aboriginal communities throughout northern Australia. The results led to the creation of the Northern Australian Football Development Foundation, which coordinates football development programs throughout this region, working closely with Kormilda College in Darwin. Donating \$350,000 to the foundation in 1996, the AFL also obtained sponsorship from CRA Limited for the employment of three full-time Aboriginal trainee development officers. 1

Finally, accepting the idea that racism needs to be eradicated in young people, the AFL aided a program fighting racism in Victorian Government Schools in 1995. Several AFL players, including Robbie Ahmat, Shane Crawford and Mark Graham, attended schools and spoke to children about racism in sport. For these and other actions, the AFL was acknowledged by the United Nations Association in 1995 with a Special Peace Award. 12 The Results The policy seems to be working. The AFL made public one such case, between Melbourne's Aboriginal Scott Chisholm and St.

Kilda player Peter Everitt. The umpire of the game reported Everitt in a letter to the AFL, and Everitt confessed to the charges. The consequences were great; Everitt not only apologized to Chisholm, but he also "acknowledged that his words were offensive not only to [him], but to his family and the Aboriginal and broader communities." 13 Everitt removed himself from AFL play for four weeks and attended four weekly education programs about awareness of Aboriginal people's issues, which were organized by Everitt's Saints.

Finally, he made a \$20,000 dollar donation to an Aboriginal community program, chosen by Chisholm. 14 It is responses like this that give the indigenous communities hope for their future in not only the AFL but society at large. Sports tend to mirror society at large. As the Australian popular culture has evolved to celebrate more and more Aboriginal activities and individuals, the sporting world had grown to embrace these players for their skill. Several teams stand out for their attitude and acceptance of Aboriginal players, especially Essendon.

However, other teams have certainly picked up the ball as well; the notable hometown Fremantle Dockers took seven indigenous players and is reaping the rewards of having such a talented team. In 1992, Leon Davis became the first indigenous player to participate in 50 games for Collingwood. 15 Roughly ten years after Winmar and Long started the revolution to stamp out racism in sports, they are still admired by today's Aboriginal players. Michael O'Loughlin, a Sydney Swan, says, "In the old days, what happened on the field stayed on the field."

But it's a new century now and a new era of footy and things like that can't be tolerated. Thanks to Nicky Winmar and Michael Long, players can now showcase their skills without worrying about any other rubbish. It's not acceptable on the street, so why should it be accepted on the footy field? " 16 West Coast Eagle David Wirrpunda says of Michael Long, " He took a stance for all Aboriginal people, not just on the football field, but in life.

Because of him, we don't have to worry about politics or anything else other than playing football... the days of name-calling and targeting a race are long gone. " 17 Adam Goodes, Sydney's ruckman and 2003 Brownlow Medal winner, said recently that he had not encountered racism on an AFL field, and Long has stated that he believes racism in football will disappear altogether within a generation. 18 The future for Aboriginal AFL players is bright. The league has recognized the unhealthy behavior of players on the field and has taken the appropriate steps to do away with that type of behavior.

They are sponsoring Aboriginal children's groups and working with non-Aboriginal children to teach them the evils of racism. By fostering the next generations of Australians to think on an enlightened level, they are working for the future. By taking an outright stand with new regulations, they have set the bar for other sports to reach for and showed the world that Australia is taking constructive steps. Leaders like Michael Long are still working endlessly to promote tolerance and understanding in this country and their efforts are causing visible change.