

Shades of racism – aboriginality and sport in australia



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Shades of Racism Overt Racism Since Australia's inception in 1788, racism has been ever-present; the basis of modern Australia was the controlled subjugation of the original Aboriginal people. This gross normalization culminated in the 'stolen generation'; a process of eugenics in order to inter-breed half-caste aboriginals, assimilate them into European appearance. We need only look to the existence of the 'White Australia' policy, which essentially denied residency to non-Europeans immigrants, to conceptualize the intolerance that has permeated Australia's history. This seems to be an accusatory and abhorrent way in which to begin a paper, but the purpose in doing so is to illustrate both the basis of disdain a lot of aboriginal people seem to hold towards 'White' Australians on a visceral level, and also the ground Australia has made in trying to restore equality, and our obligation in which to continue to do. Australia has a long, rich history of organized sport, though not one of purity and freedom from belligerent intolerance.

Organized sport may be seen to have been a positive influence in the eradication of racism in Australia, elevating the demographic that has been so marginality and improving their perception in the eyes of mainstream society.

Historically, participation of Aboriginal Australians in organized sport was heavily restricted; racial barriers and systemic prejudice meant that missionaries determined participation levels arbitrarily. Traditionally, games played indigenous Australians were those that would teach their youth life skills, preparing them for adulthood and the responsibilities that come with it.

These 'games' would focus on incorporating self-reliance, discipline and also teamwork as they prepared for life tasks of hunting and gathering. 5 The missionaries used European organized sport within the community as a way of encouraging 'civilization' amongst what was viewed as an inferior race. Cricket in particular was incorporated as a way of promoting industriousness and loyalty within the aboriginal people, as if they were subservient house pets.

6 Systemic prejudice and racial barriers continued to hamper the progress of Indigenous athletes throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.

Albert Henry, one of the first successful and notable Aboriginal cricket players, amidst 'reports' that aborigines were 'genetic checkers', was targeted and continuously 'no-balled' in a cricket match in 1904 until he walked from the pitch in disgust. 7 Legislative Acts of Parliament were even more demoralizing, encouraging the indigenous Australians to deny their heritage so as to be able to escape discriminatory laws; these repugnant laws 'character and standard of intelligence'. Imperial Racism This dynamic in Australia began to change more notably in the 1950s, with a new wave of aboriginal talent hitting the mainstream media as successful athletes in their own right.

This included the likes of Lionel Rose, Owen Collingwood and Derby McCarthy. At the height of this a significant moment in AFL history came about when Carlton legend and indigenous player Sadie Jackson was exonerated by the tribunal after striking another player on the basis of racial provocation. Though at the time there was no truth to the claim, and simply

a ploy to have Jackson available for the Grand Final, it was nonetheless historical in a step towards expunging racial slurs from professional football. Indigenous Jockey Derby McCarthy was also instrumental in bringing awareness to the plight of the indigenous population; McCarthy was adamant that if he were a success, it would be important that he be known as an aboriginal success.

This was in response to the Australian media who tended to 'Whitewash' the aboriginal athletes and separate them from the rest of their demographic, condescendingly explaining that these exceptions to the general rule had escaped the apathy of their people. ¹⁰ It was a common consensus that they were Australians when they were winning but Aborigines at all other times.

¹¹ Though the racism seemed to have shifted from overt and direct, it was still there in at least a patronizing and condescending sense, still demoralizing for wider immunity and the athletes themselves who wanted to be role models for their race.

It was opined by aboriginal figure Charlie Perkins, that this sporting fame '... Gains them (aborigines) acceptance, not as Aborigine's or even as people, but merely as sports stars..

. ¹² The undertones of racism and prejudice were still there even during the 1994 Commonwealth Games after Cathy Freeman won her track medal; Freeman, a proud indigenous Australian, sported both the Australian and Indigenous flags on her victory lap. Following this she was threatened by an official to be tripped of any subsequent medals should she be so bold as to attempt something so daring. ³ 'Casual' Racism Although leagues such as <https://assignbuster.com/shades-of-racism-aboriginality-and-sport-in-australia/>

the FALL, in 1995, and the EARL, in 1997, put in place policies of anti-vilification rules, there are those who felt that this regime was merely enacted to placate the concerned group advocating that the age-old adage of 'What happens on the field stays on the field' be abandoned. ¹⁴ It is however, difficult to argue with the result being a remarkably significant decrease in incidence of on-field racial abuse.

As the FALL and the NOR, and other sporting codes, spread their wings into a more widespread, multicultural game, the attitudes are gradually beginning to change.

With the sports that enrapture Australia generally, our athletes have never been more elite, better paid or more sought after, almost as a commodity. Role indigenous leaders, in a sporting sense, to which they can aspire. Unfortunately though, there are still undertones of racism in a 'casual' sense. Casual racism might occur when the perpetrator is jovial about racism, or when it is dismissed as unintentional.

Though racism has seen a dramatic decline in a professional arena, many rural competitions still go unchecked and remain a significant problem.

An anonymous rural football fan delivered the following quote: Of course I sing out 'black bastard', but I don't mean it. It's all part of being at the footy on a Saturday arbor. The media makes too much out of it. ¹⁵ This particular passage sums up what might be seen as the casual, laid back Australian approach to racism, and it is this kind of relaxed attitude towards prejudice that will reprove Australia in darker times in the eyes of the rest of the world.

An iconic moment in the fight against racism came in 1993, when a defiant Knick Winner, after being subjected to a tirade of racial slurs from the crowd, pulled p his Jumper and pointed to his skin with dignity.

Yet 20 years later, we still have incidence of this casual racism wherein Andrew Johns referred to an opposition player as a ‘ black [expletive]’, in a speech of motivation to his team. It has been postulated that the media play a large role in propagating this casual racism; when these athletes are the centre of media coverage, it is the fact of their aboriginal that is the focus of the attention.

Media attacks align with racial stereotypes, particularly of aboriginal capriciousness; namely that aboriginals are prone to alcoholism and are unable to handle pressure. 6 Subliminal Racism There is no question that with every passing year, Australia seems to take giant leaps in erasing prejudice, even if it includes one or two indiscretions along the way. The attitudes of the majority are Weeding out’ the unacceptable.

Throughout the sass’s and into the present, racism has taken on another guise, one that is met with some ambivalence.

The disposition of this attitude seems to be positive, but it suggests a lack of appreciation or respect. Tony Locket, the great SST Gilda and Sydney full forward, ventured of the indigenous, ‘ They just seem to have that knack, that omitting differently 7 This comment in itself does not intend to harm or discredit the aboriginal athlete, but the consequences of these kind of broad statements are pernicious. Even the commentators of today’s professional football talk about ‘ black magic’ and an innate ability.

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The ramification is that it is viewed as a biological advantage; it is the result of natural talent rather than hard work. 18 Moving Forward Racist and prejudice attitudes have been a strong feature in Australia's history, and they have remained strong in contemporary Australia even if in different forms. The position of this paper has posited that we still have a ways to go, but that is not to that has been achieved. This has been the outcome of a conscious development of strong social norms against racism. Professional football codes have helped pave the way to a more tolerant and harmonious Australia.

These sporting organizations are excellent vehicles for both establishing these social norms and inculcating them to the wider population, particular given the younger demographic audience.

It is difficult to comprehend a social setting that could replicate the opportunities sport revised in breaking down cultural, racial and gender barriers for participation. The authority bestowed on sport, particularly the more prolific football codes, by their audiences place them in a unique position in which they have the power to sculpt attitudes and behavior.