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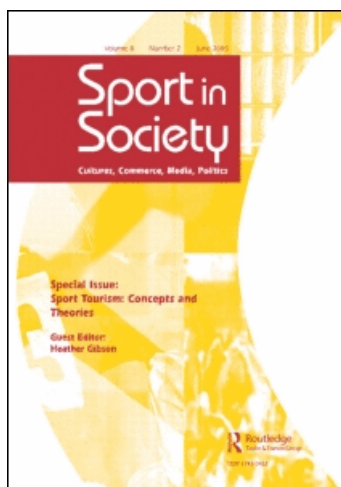
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## Race relations, Indigenous Australia and the social impact of professional Australian football

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We consider how Indigenous athletes have become symbols of what is perceived by white Australia to be progressive race relations. In particular, the men's professional sports of Australian football and Rugby League draw the most heavily mediated attention as well as significant numbers of Indigenous players. We draw upon the narratives of key advocates of Indigenous participation and performance in professional Australian football: journalists and recruiting managers. The emergent theme of white privilege is used to examine how their advocacy of Indigenous performance masks shortcomings in access and opportunity beyond playing roles. We conclude with the idea that race relations progress fulfils the needs of white Australia but fails to sufficiently deliver genuine opportunity for Indigenous Australian participants.

### Introduction

Tomorrow night's game is a celebration of Indigenous footballers, so we can expect some magic from the talented Aborigines in both line-ups. This so-called blockbuster is in need of some magic from (Essendon) Bomber Dean Rioli and Sydney's Michael O'Loughlin. (Sydney) Swan Goodes summed up his frustrating talent by kicking four goals from full back last week against the Bulldogs, but while all three provide flashes of brilliance, consistency is lacking.<sup>1</sup>

Our introductory quote is indicative of the type of media reporting associated with the participation of Indigenous footballers. Such reporting is characterized by an implied performance uniqueness which draws upon racialized thinking. However, it is far removed from conventional understandings of racism which involve exclusion, derogation and unambiguous prejudice. By contrast, the commentaries are clearly supportive of inclusion and regularly concur with the confident self-positioning on race relations proclaimed by the Australian Football League (AFL). Drawing upon the newly elected President of the USA's 'new foundation', the CEO of the Australian Football League addressed the commencement of the 2009 season by intoning a mission statement that placed the League in a position rivalling the Australian government. In a speech entitled 'Above and Beyond: League's Duty in Hard Times', the CEO extolled the virtues of the AFL as an agency of considerable progress. He averred:

Australian Football is in a fortunate position to be part of our community's revival. Over the past several years, we have achieved President Obama's 'new foundation' and we have used that to provide our game, our clubs, our players and our supporters with a 'lasting prosperity'.

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A prosperous game is one that can engage with our supporters in all areas, and we make this vow – in these difficult times we will extend our engagement in as many areas as we are able.<sup>2</sup>

Well known journalist Patrick Smith concurred and followed with his own view regarding the impact of the AFL beyond the confines of the various stadia and club rooms:

The AFL sees itself as more than a football code. It is an agent of social change. It introduced a formal racial vilification code before other sports; it tested for illicit drugs before other sports. It has this month introduced a personal code of conduct that will apply to all players and officials. Demetriou has told his executive they have the opportunity to make great change to football and, through it, the community. His team are good listeners.<sup>3</sup>

Much of the enlightened stance the League has embraced over the past 15 years occurred against a backdrop of national hard-line political conservatism and social xenophobia. The prime minister of that period drew heavily from populist and assimilationist notions of nationhood.<sup>4</sup> During this time sport provided a recurring opportunity for organizations and governments (mostly controlled by white middle-class men) to celebrate unprecedented progress in race relations as evidenced by the achievements of individuals such as Cathy Freeman and Michael Long. Freeman was an international celebrity. Long's celebrity was contained within Australia. Within Australia, the AFL draws the highest attendances, attracts the largest media coverage and maintains a playing presence in every state and territory. It is widely promoted as 'the national game' and a sport which is a pioneer and frontrunner in race relations.

We examine and contest the assumptions surrounding these proclamations. We begin by providing a social context in which the AFL competition takes place and also profile Indigenous Australians and indicate their participation and contribution in Australian football. We draw upon narratives from key participants in the sport and situate their narratives and ideas within the theoretical notions of Hall regarding inferential racism, as well as Jhally and Lewis' work on enlightened racism.<sup>5</sup> We discuss how the containment of Indigenous participation is framed along common assumptions centred around biological determinism, stereotyped ideas about ambition many of which have enjoyed currency in Australian society since the early nineteenth century. Given this continued structural shortcoming, we conclude by arguing that the race relations that occur in the AFL reconfirm colonialism rather than forge a situation of reconciliation which remains far from complete. Reconciliation requires nothing less than the establishment of a fully operationalized Indigenous Australian team in the expanded Australian Football League. We also suggest how this can be achieved while addressing the objections and concerns of the alliance.

### **The Australian football landscape**

Despite its relatively modest national population, four different football codes contest the Australian winter sports landscape. Australian Football and Rugby League are clearly the most popular and mediated team sports during the Australian winter. Football has its bases in the southern and western cities of Adelaide, Melbourne and Perth. Rugby League is the most popular sport in Brisbane and Sydney. The AFL teams (re)established in Sydney and Brisbane were originally suburban-based Melbourne teams who were on the brink of financial extinction at the time. The South Melbourne Swans became the Sydney Swans and the Fitzroy Lions became the Brisbane Lions. The NRL has also attempted to establish teams in the rival AFL market. This venture failed in Adelaide and Perth. The Melbourne Storm remain and have won two league titles. Despite their

on-field success, the Melbourne Storm rely on 'outside' assistance and are 100% owned by News Limited. Nevertheless, the NRL is the sport of choice in New South Wales and Queensland. Such is the popularity, that it maintains NRL teams in several regional cities. Irrespective of relative popularity, both sports have recently been sites of Indigenous overrepresentation. This is in stark contrast to other 'national' sports such as cricket, rugby union and soccer.

The pervasiveness of sport in Australia has been well documented and the level of participation has been consistent for several decades. There have been higher levels of participation with younger age groups and males participate at a higher rate than females. However, approximately 32% of all Australians were involved in playing or organizing sport during 2002.<sup>6</sup> While these figures represent a very high rate when compared with other nations, they are far below the levels of participation in sport for Indigenous Australians. According to the ABS (2005) almost 40% of Indigenous females, and over 50% of Indigenous males participated in sport during 2002. The popularity of sport among Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders has been noted and has drawn the attention of researchers seeking to investigate, and inevitably challenge, the widespread assumptions connected to Indigenous participation and performance.<sup>7</sup> The sociocultural research literature centred upon Indigenous Australian sport participation has concerned itself with stereotyping, racialized mediation, experiential reality of Aboriginal basketball, and purging of white guilt in Australian football and Rugby League.<sup>8</sup>

### **Historical context: race relations in Australia**

The Indigenous peoples of Australia are the inheritors of the oldest continuous cultures in the world. According to archaeological research, they have occupied the Australian continent for at least 40 millennia.<sup>9</sup> Indigenous peoples across Australia developed highly successful and stable societies that sustained a diversity of cultures and languages. The societies that emerged in Australia adopted decision-making processes in which the virtues of equality, respect and consensus politics were highly valued. These political systems have been described as constituting 'pure democracy' because every individual in society had direct input into decision-making processes. In Indigenous Australia, every person functioned as a self-determining entity with responsibilities to govern their own actions and the collective actions of their society.

The arrival of the British in Australia during the last quarter of the eighteenth century witnessed the destruction of these hitherto self-governing societies. The impact of British colonization for Indigenous peoples in Australia was catastrophic, mirroring the destructive colonial projects in the Americas and the Pacific. Dispossession of land, the smashing of culture and language, and the denial of common law rights that Indigenous peoples possessed as British subjects succeeded in transforming once proud and independent peoples into passive welfare recipients dependant on the charity of colonial governments. A significant factor in this transformation was the colonial policy of 'Aboriginal Protection'. Shaping the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians during the period 1836–1972, the policies of Aboriginal Protection placed Indigenous people on missions and reserves where they became segregated from non-Indigenous Australia. Denied rights by a legislative and regulatory framework that severely curtailed the ability to control their own destiny, Indigenous people could not work, marry or parent their children without the approval of colonial authorities. The federation of the six British colonies in 1901 added a further layer of discrimination

with two racist constitutional sections effectively excluding Indigenous people from Australian citizenship. The deliberate transformation of Indigenous Australia from independent and self-determining peoples into passive recipients of government handouts has had several negative consequences that continue to impact on race relations in contemporary Australia.<sup>10</sup>

### **Profile of Indigenous disadvantage**

The consequences of colonialism are no more clearly illustrated than in national measures of social and economic wellbeing which indicate that the first Australians are among the last Australians in terms of income, wealth, employment, education and health status. Indigenous people continue to experience an average life expectancy 17 years below that achieved, expected and demanded by non-Indigenous Australians. The gap in life expectancy is given substance by the catalogue of disease that continues to place Aboriginal people at a distinct disadvantage from the moment of birth. Infant mortality rates remain double those experienced by other Australians. Indigenous people are 3 times more likely to have cardiovascular diseases, 1.3 times more likely to develop cancers, 3.9 times more likely to develop respiratory diseases and 7.5 times more likely to be impacted by diabetes. To these 'lifestyle' diseases of the First World can be added the infectious diseases normally associated with the Third World which finds Indigenous people 7 times more likely to contract TB, 8 times more likely to contract Hepatitis A and 3 times more likely to contract Hepatitis B. Finally according to measures of mental health, Aboriginal people remain 2.5 times more likely to self-harm than non-Aboriginal Australians.<sup>11</sup>

The poor health profile of Indigenous Australia is closely linked to a social and economic status that sees Indigenous people remain at the bottom of the national education and employment ladder. During a time of unprecedented economic boom the unemployment rate for Indigenous people remained three to four times higher than the national rate at 30%. Median income for Indigenous Australian is significantly lower than that enjoyed by others Australians. Although primarily due to a persistent reliance on welfare, median income also remains lower because Indigenous people earn less money within the same occupational categories than others Australians. For example, in 2001, the median income of Aboriginal managers was 81% of the non-Aboriginal median, for professionals it was 73% and for labourers just 56%.<sup>12</sup>

Indigenous peoples continue to experience unacceptably poor outcomes in education. The highest level of formal education achieved for 33% of all Indigenous Australians is Year 9 or below compared to 16% for all other Australians. The comparative disadvantage of Indigenous people in education becomes even more apparent when grade progression rates are considered: 89% of Aboriginal students progress from Year 9 to Year 10, compared to 99% of all other Australian students. This state of perennial underperformance at the secondary level continues in higher education where Indigenous people are under-represented in all levels of study from Bachelor level degrees to PhDs. In order to achieve parity with non-Indigenous Australia, Indigenous enrolments in Bachelor degrees would need to increase by 115%, at Masters level by 414% and at PhD level by 282%.<sup>13</sup>

### **Racism and the national psyche**

The profile that emerges from these statistical data indicates the influence that nineteenth-century politics continues to exert over Indigenous Australia today. However, we argue

that the fundamental significance of this empirical evidence rests not in the statistics themselves but in the national psychological and discursive exclusions of Indigenous people that underpin their continued marginality in almost every aspect of contemporary Australian life. Perhaps a more important consequence of past colonial practice has been the popular acceptance of racist ideas, both scientific and Christian, which provided the rationale and the justification for Australian government to formally discriminate against Indigenous people. What once informed the policy agendas of colonial governments and the research agendas of the colonial academy continues to inform popular representations of Indigenous people that are found littered throughout Australian literature, film and media. As Marcia Langton, a leading Indigenous academic, once famously observed, the vast majority of Australians 'know' Indigenous people through the stories of former colonists.<sup>14</sup>

Reinterpreted in contemporary popular culture the vast majority of Australians come to 'know' and 'understand' Indigenous people through the various representations constructed for their consumption by non-Indigenous people from James Cook to John Howard and Howard Sattler. Functioning as ideology and forming a hegemonic consensus on the racial and cultural characteristics of Indigenous Australia, the stories of former colonists have been primarily concerned to define Indigenous peoples as inferior opposites of a contemporary Australian national identity from which they are excluded. Defined racially by whiteness, culturally by an adherence to British values and a masculinity that sought to place the white Australian male as a superior type of Briton, the Indigenous people came to represent the racial and cultural opposite of the idealized image of Australian national character and national values. The imperatives of Australian racism conceived that Indigenous people were racially inferior and culturally defective according to the iron laws of biology and natural selection. The Indigenous people of Australia accordingly became associated with the most negative and debasing stereotype which characterized them as primitive, stone-age, savage, the missing-link, monkey-like, child-like, over-sexed, physical, unintelligent, incapable, irresponsible, lazy, parasitic, dishonest, violent, drunkard etc. etc.<sup>15</sup>

The notion that the present day disadvantage of Indigenous people is their own fault and not the legacy of the inhumanity inherent in the colonial project stems from understandings of racial and cultural hierarchies that are deliberately designed to remove the legacy of Australian colonialism from public consciousness. Hence, to this day, it is considered socially acceptable and indeed 'common sense' for non-Indigenous Australians to conclude that the lower income, employment, education and health status endured by Indigenous people today is the result of racial/cultural attributes which render them too 'lazy' to find and keep a job and too 'stupid' to get an education or take proper care of their own health. Indigenous leaders who speak up about the social and economic problems that affect the wellbeing of their people are often responded to by the 'mainstream' media with calls to 'let go of the past' and be thankful for the many benefits brought to them by a 'benign' and 'good' colonialism that delivered the natives tea, law, cricket and the other trappings of British civilization.

The entrenched and persistent nature of non-Indigenous (mis)representation of Indigenous people has been sustained because the formal policy agendas of Aboriginal Protection and segregation were replaced with the contrary policies of Assimilation in the 1960s and Self-determined Integration in the 1970s. Hegemonic racism and the negative attributes associated with Indigenous people continued to influence, direct and frame the terms of the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia. The new demands for Indigenous people to assimilate/integrate to the 'mainstream' norms of

Anglo-Australia occurred within the context of lingering doubts about Indigenous capability to meet the challenges and responsibilities associated with political citizenship and participatory engagement in the economics of the free market. Old colonial stories through which non-Indigenous Australia 'understood' and 'knew' about 'the Aborigines' continued to shape national attitudes towards Indigenous people. In the age of assimilation, integration and self-determination Indigenous people became marginalized through a particular discourse that positioned Aboriginal racial and cultural deficit in representations of the Indigenous person as corrupt politician and incompetent administrator. As a result the self-determination in substance became a policy that encouraged limited self-management in which Indigenous people were co-opted by Australian governments to fill low skilled jobs within the public service and 'Aboriginal organizations' established by the Federal government. Although seemingly progressive, the policy agendas of assimilation and self-determined integration remained captive to the longstanding ideas that positioned Indigenous people at the bottom of racial and cultural hierarchies, an oppositional counterpoint to the top of the hierarchical tree, a position that Anglo-Australia strenuously proclaimed itself to occupy.

In the 1990s the Australian government (re)shaped the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia according to the new agenda it called Aboriginal reconciliation. To many this change signalled a new and positive beginning in the fraught history of Australian race relations. However, the most recent shift in the terminology of Australian government policy did nothing to displace the fundamental ideas which frame the Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationship. Consistent with earlier policy regimes, reconciliation positioned non-Indigenous Australia as leaders in a process that perversely placed responsibility for the successful resolution of the (post) colonial condition on Indigenous people. This facet of reconciliation became obvious during the period of the Howard Liberal Government that retained the policy but shifted responsibility for its success from its own administration to the underfunded and resourced National Council for Reconciliation.

### **Indigenous presence in the AFL**

One of the often-noted aspects of Australian men's team sports in the 1990s was the emergence of a growing presence of Indigenous (Aborigines, Torres Strait Islanders) recruits into the Australian Football League (AFL). The AFL comprises 16 teams/clubs – 10 in the greater Melbourne metropolitan area, 2 from Perth, 2 from Adelaide, and 1 team in each of Brisbane and Sydney. At the beginning of the 2009 season, 71 Indigenous players are officially listed. Indigenous players are not found in equal numbers across the League. In fact, approximately two thirds are found in the clubs outside the Melbourne metropolitan area. Several Melbourne clubs have not had a strong record of recruiting Indigenous players. In addition, much of the period coincided with the considerable increase in mass media stories, narratives of the reasons and the impact surrounding the six-fold increase in Indigenous player representation in the AFL, court cases dealing with Indigenous Land Rights (Yorta Yorta in northern Victoria), the Stolen Generations Report (and former Prime Minister John Howard's refusal to say Sorry), and a number of racial vilification cases in the AFL. Despite the increase in Indigenous players, however, a recent study<sup>16</sup> found Indigenous AFL players were assigned into non-central field positions that place an emphasis on speed and quickness and away from positions widely believed to require leadership and intellectual skills. Furthermore, despite comprising approximately 10% of AFL players (as compared to 2% of the national population), Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders are still absent from team or club management positions.



There have been numerous accounts regaling the AFL as the leader in Australian sports organizations with respect to opportunity access and positive race relations. It is a common practice for key stakeholders such as journalists to extol the virtues of the AFL as pioneer and leader amongst sports organizations and also suggestive of such amongst *any* organization. The common-sense reality is the production of shared language about Indigenous footballers – stereotypes, beliefs and ideologies reinforced in the routine narratives of everyday thought. The identity of Indigenous AFL players is mostly constructed and maintained by an alliance including managers, coaches, players, media commentators and sports scientists. In this essay, we draw upon the narrative data provided by two key groups: journalists and recruiting managers.

### Data sources: journalists and recruiting managers

Our key data sources play vital and key roles in the dissemination of Indigenous participation and performance. They are immersed in the AFL and, as with all of the recruiting managers, many journalists are assigned entirely to football. They operate in markedly contrasted domains. The narratives of journalists are public and thus readily accessible. The narratives of recruiting managers are intended solely for reading within the club.

Journalists serve a key role in deploying and disseminating dominant meanings of public performance. As Turner argues, ‘media texts offer especially rich opportunities to observe the cultural construction of meaning, locations where we can see the social production of ideas and values happening before our very eyes’.<sup>17</sup> Despite their claims to objectivity, journalists in particular, and the mass media in general, selectively construct particular narratives which serve certain interests and not others. Journalists writing about Indigenous sports participation and performance frequently emphasize the race relations ‘achievements’ of the AFL. They effectively reinforce that status quo of established power and race relations. For the specific purpose of this project, we combed the major newspaper outlets for any reports. Our raw data sources were from *The Age*, *Herald Sun*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Australian*.

The aggregation of media ownership in Australia means that the majority of newspapers are owned and produced by News Limited or the Fairfax Group. News Limited (owned by Rupert Murdoch) is responsible for the *Herald Sun* (Melbourne), *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney) and *The Australian*. Fairfax publishes *The Age* (Melbourne) and *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Between them, these newspapers account for the highest circulation figures and the majority national readership. Our analysis was not intended as a standard content analysis. Rather, we searched for reports which contained specific Indigenous ambition and performance reference, and were representative of broad themes.

Journalists have to negotiate the inherent tension between insider and outsider. Such is their sometimes vague and unclear role that two club presidents also serve as TV commentators during the season. This practice has rarely been criticized along conflict-of-interest lines. Rather, it has occasionally been questioned because of the perception that it may contribute to work overload – failing to pay full attention to the management of the club.

Recruiting managers are employed by all clubs. They are ideal sources for data regarding the logic and rationale for recruiting Indigenous players, they are uniquely positioned as AFL ‘insiders’, and they function as gatekeepers with their decisions determining who gains admittance. Although each provided consent for disclosure, the identities of individual managers have been rendered anonymous in this study.

We arranged and compiled narrative data according to the key themes of understanding – enlightened racism and inferential racism.

### Enlightened brilliance

There would be little or no debate that professional sport in Australia has left behind the practice of overt racism. There were many reported incidents over several decades. However, even leading Indigenous figures such as Michael Long have joined the chorus. Long now serves as the AFL manager of Indigenous development. The classic overt racism has been replaced by a bevy of sports figures strongly and enthusiastically serving as advocates for increased opportunity and access. For example, Australian cricket legend Dennis Lillee, now serving as Fast Bowling Consultant, exemplified this sentiment in speaking about the potential for Indigenous talent to add to the fortunes of Australian cricket when he said:

Fast bowling requires what we call fast twitch muscles and you only have to look at them playing football and see how quick they are and how dynamic they are. Then you can relate certainly that that muscle movement would go very well for fast bowling.<sup>18</sup>

Lillee's comments signify racialisation of human performance but were not challenged as such. While specifically intended as declarations for support of Indigenous opportunity, similar notions of racialisation were made by AFL coaches.

It's exciting, most of our Indigenous boys have got a natural talent in the way they play, a lot of speed and run and carry. They play with freedom. I mean that's one of the things I love. They don't have any fear and they play the game very naturally and that's the way Jarrad plays his footy.

Former AFL coach Kevin Sheedy has been routinely credited by the AFL, journalists and supporters as being the vanguard of Indigenous participation in the AFL. He was quoted as saying:

[T]he skills of the Aboriginal and Islander players had been a godsend for the competition. We've struck gold with the Indigenous players. You think you're a coach and then you get some really wonderfully talented people and they actually teach you how to coach. Indigenous players, they don't need a compass and a protractor. They know the angle coming into the goals.<sup>19</sup>

Journalists also regularly extol the 'special' qualities of Indigenous footballers:

I don't think it is just my imagination, but I believe that many of the AFL's Indigenous players bring that joy to the game at the highest level. It seems that Indigenous players are some of the most creative and intuitive in the league.<sup>20</sup>

These quotes provide evidence of what Jhally and Lewis refer to as enlightened racism. They drew upon the examples of popular American television programmes which provided an idealization of race relations favoured by white Americans. Far removed from the crude behaviour associated with racial vilification, Jhally and Lewis refer to enlightened racism as a form of racism that constructs positive images of Black America while hiding cultural and economic inequalities. The popular black television characters favoured by white America are confined to a limited and finite range of attributes.

Likewise, the controlling alliance in the AFL is able to construct positive images of Indigenous footballers without confronting the structural inequalities of the sport. That is, Indigenous participation is now celebrated by the alliance but is contained and limited to playing roles. The evidence presented elsewhere strongly suggests that this participation, with minor exceptions,<sup>21</sup> excludes access to leadership and decision-making positions.

### Inferential racism: explaining Indigenous ambition

Inferential racism is an idea established by Stuart Hall's work on media studies in Britain when writing about the involvement of Black Britons in everyday life.<sup>22</sup> Racial predicates, according to Hall, are pervasive and ingrained into everyday discourse. Likewise, the production of shared ideas about Indigenous footballers – to 'kick the freak goal' or 'do the magical stuff' – is reinforced in the routine narratives of everyday thought of many managers and journalists in particular. Clearly, everyday, taken-for-granted understandings of race and racial difference permeate the working environment of Australian football. When discussing the reasons for the obvious lack of opportunity for Indigenous players after their career, several managers drew upon such discourse when providing explanations of Indigenous ambition. This was in response to one of the standard questions which was presented in each interview, 'Are we on the brink where Aboriginal players once their playing careers end will start to enter the management area?' As one of the recruiting managers told us:

I can't think of any Aboriginal player that ever had anything to do with, that have had any interest in money at all, but these guys are making a fortune. In first six months or twelve months, as I said, he didn't say much, but he had three cars he should never have had, he went bought cars, what have you bought that thing for, you know, he say 'is it any good' you'd say, 'no it's not', he go and trade it in and lose \$5000 in two weeks on it, had no respect, no interest in money, most of his money went home to Darwin to look after the family and all that sort of stuff.<sup>23</sup>

Others replied in a similar sceptical tone:

We are sitting there saying 'are they bullshitting us?' They just lead a simple life, you come round to our place, we go home, you come round next year, I'll give you the best kangaroo steaks, everybody comes to eat, the neighbours smell what I'm cooking and they're there, and you're thinking: Can they become coaches? They live more day to day.

I'm not sure about that. Look Mick McLean has been very much a natural leader and rated as such but I don't know with a lot of the Aboriginal boys that they like to lead. There happy to go do their thing, play the game and with the skills thing, but I don't know if they want to get embroiled in all the rigmarole that goes with being an assistant coach and attending team meetings and standing up and being the backline coach saying 'well, look. This is what I think we should do'. I think, by and large, perhaps it doesn't suit the average Aboriginal temperament to do that.<sup>24</sup>

Some managers were more optimistic and open to the idea and suggested that eventually coaching roles would be offered to, and accepted by, Indigenous players. For example, one manager said:

Michael Long appears to be a person who just might coach one day, he just seems to have a good feel, when you hear him and listen to him and whatever. He's a special quality person. Maybe we're just seeing that in the next couple of years. I was just watching the basketball the other night, I'm a gridiron fan, there is Negroes [*sic*] coaching in the NFL and the NBA, so maybe the progression is maybe it's taking a bit longer, and maybe the numbers haven't been there in the first place. Like, we're talking about a fairly small number of aboriginals playing league football. So I suppose it will come from the players who have played AFL football.

They really love playing the game, the playing part of it, is the part they love and perhaps because everything comes so naturally to them, that perhaps they didn't take in the fact of the teaching part of the game, normally you don't have to go to an Aboriginal boy and teach him how to kick, because he's already got that skill, it's become a natural thing, you don't have to teach him how to mark the ball, so perhaps they would find it very hard then to go and teach that technique, because it's so natural to them, and as I said, they love the game,

so it's just the playing part of it, that once the playing part was finished, they couldn't see any enjoyment in the rest of it, the coaching side of things, perhaps that has something to do with it.<sup>25</sup>

In a story regarding the provision of a sports programme by police, the reporter simultaneously extolled the virtues of access and opportunity but clearly drew upon the familiar 'natural athlete' belief when writing 'but as we've seen in agility sports such as football, Aboriginal people have a natural sense of balance and are very athletic'.<sup>26</sup>

These reflections from managers and journalists not only provide further evidence of inferential racism but also provide evidence of the persistence of racialized thinking. The universally condemned blatant racist talk is usurped by a far more subtle, but equally insidious, racialized logic<sup>27</sup> and more socially acceptable discourse associated with racial science.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, the abiding racialized stereotypes typify Indigenous participants as limited to 'natural', 'brilliant', 'magical' playing roles but rule out potential for leadership and/or management roles.

### Reconciliation meets Australian football

While the emergence of Aboriginal reconciliation constitutes an important development in the history of Australian government management of Indigenous affairs, this development has also been important in the evolution of the Australian Football League (AFL). Formed in 1990 at the same historical moment as Aboriginal reconciliation, the AFL quickly became an enthusiastic and high profiled advocate of the reconciliation cause. In 1993 the AFL celebrated the International Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples. During the pre-match entertainment of the 1993 Grand Final, the culture of Australia's Indigenous peoples was highlighted. In a game won by Essendon, Aboriginal footballer Michael Long and his mentor Kevin Sheedy, the non-Indigenous coach credited with bringing Indigenous players to the AFL, established themselves as symbols of reconciliation in Australian Football and of AFL commitment to Indigenous Australia. In the time since the 'watershed' 1993 season the AFL has deliberately established itself as the national sporting body that 'knows' and 'understands' Indigenous people. Aware of the need to position Australian football as a sport welcoming and inclusive of Indigenous people, the AFL introduced a number of initiatives designed to draw attention to its reconciliation credentials. 'Dreamtime at the G', the bi-annual Indigenous All-Stars games, recognition of an Indigenous 'Team of the Century' and institution of the 'Marn-Grook Cup' have all functioned to position the AFL as the leading Australian institution to pursue and achieve positive outcomes in the cause of reconciliation. To this end the AFL regularly supports these claims by citing the over-representation of playing personnel drawn from Indigenous backgrounds.

With the abiding assistance of a bevy of registered writers, the AFL elevates itself as the purveyor of social justice well beyond the parameters normally associated with a sports administrator. The normal strictures of team sport all but eliminate any prospect of self-determination. Such are the embedded traditions (invented or otherwise) and practices, that all new recruits are expected to be a 'good fit' for the team and the club. In short, recruits must readily acquiesce to established practice, values and belief systems. The recruitment of players is a complex endeavour that inevitably results in a team base that necessitates player migration from the home town or locality. As a professional sport it carries on the outmoded and nationally discredited practice of integration and assimilation.

The prospects for Indigenous players also have to be considered against the backdrop of the accelerated and dramatic downsizing and withdrawal of facilities in rural and regional Australia given that the majority of Indigenous players come from these areas. Additionally, while there is pressure to reduce the size of team lists, the number of teams in the competition is being increased. Stylistically and organizationally there is a wholesale current practice of clubs and teams being managed, coached and selected by non-Aborigines. Despite the unprecedented recruitment of Indigenous players, there has not been any change in off field opportunity. The boosters of the AFL policy disregard the continued concentration of Indigenous players in Indigenous positions. That is, the increased numbers are celebrated as a sign of progress in race relations and opportunity but in effect, it is more of the same. The next necessary step for the AFL is to follow the pathway established at the national and move on from integration and assimilation to reconciliation. The barriers that are entrenched at the national level are mirrored at the AFL. That is,

The great lesson that stands out is that non-Aboriginals, who currently hold all the power dealing with Aboriginals, have to give up the usually well intentioned efforts to do things for or to Aboriginals, to give up the assumption that they know what is best for Aboriginals ... who have to be led, educated, manipulated, and re-shaped into the image of the dominant community. Instead, Aboriginals must be recognised for what they are, a peoples in their own right with their own culture, history and values.<sup>29</sup>

National Indigenous Television (NITV) was established in 2007. It is free to air in Northern Territory and part of the cable television package elsewhere in Australia. Sport features regularly on NITV with broadcasts of cricket, basketball, football and netball. Two weekly programmes – The Marngrook AFL Footy Show and The Barefoot Rugby League Show – are 2-hour programmes produced, managed and hosted entirely by Indigenous staff. The shows include segments and guests and follow the standard format as other AFL and NRL shows. They are clearly distinguished from the structure of the AFL which is produced, managed and hosted by non-Indigenous staff. The current sizeable Aboriginal talent pool has been primarily sought for ‘magical’, ‘uncanny’, ‘breathtaking flair’ on field abilities. Despite the boast of increased numbers, some aspects remain wholly unchanged. Recently in Melbourne, the headquarters of the AFL and base of 12 of the 16 clubs, the NRL conducted a promotion for the forthcoming State of Origin Rugby League challenge match between NSW and Queensland. The launch focused upon three individuals – the respective coaches and the MC. Notably, the coach of NSW (Craig Bellamy) was the exception. That is, both the MC (Gordon Tallis) and the Queensland coach (Mal Meninga) are Indigenous. Nothing was made of this because all individuals have long held leadership roles in the NRL. Meninga has been a coach and selector for many years. Tallis is a media commentator with Fox Sports TV. Unlike the National Rugby League, there are no head coaches, no selectors, no commissioners, and no recruiting managers in the AFL.

The next stage needed for the AFL to move towards reconciliation is the requirement for Indigenous leadership opportunities off the playing field. This can readily be achieved via the establishment of an Indigenous-led AFL team. However, the AFL and the controlling alliance of newspaper journalists and coaches have strongly rejected any possibility of the establishment of an Indigenous-led AFL team. During the launch of an event entitled Cross Cultural Week in 2000, Aboriginal leader Charles Perkins referred to the AFL as engaging ‘racism at the highest level’ because the AFL had rejected the idea of establishing an Aboriginal Australian Football tournament. Perkins said: ‘They didn’t agree with Aborigines playing football together ... That’s racist talk ... that came from

the AFL. That's disgraceful. The AFL has got a lot to learn.'<sup>30</sup> The AFL responded by declaring that, 'The AFL could not support any football competition for one group only that precluded other players from competing on the basis of religion, colour or race.' Perkins' comments drew disdain and hostility such as the opinion expressed by the high circulation *Herald Sun* newspaper:

Charles Perkins' comments yesterday are an insult to those in football who have committed themselves so heavily in time and spirit to give due respect and recognition to black Australians. Ever since Kevin Sheedy alerted us to the riches in the Aboriginal Community, the situation has improved every year.<sup>31</sup>

Indeed former coach Kevin Sheedy has come to personify the social impact claim that the AFL has assumed in respect to Indigenous participation in the game. As a pioneer of Indigenous player participation in the 1990s Kevin Sheedy has been portrayed as the key figure of reconciliation in sport, a portrayal enhanced by his role as father figure and mentor to Michael Long. Yet, the extent of Sheedy's support for Aboriginal participation in Australian Football and that of the AFL itself was recently revealed when he spoke out against the formation of an Indigenous team franchise joining an expanded national competition. Sheedy, one of the prime movers in fostering Aboriginal and Islander talent in the sport, said any move towards an exclusively Indigenous club could undo much of the bridge-building that the AFL has achieved with the Indigenous community. The former Essendon coach said he would rather see Aboriginal talent spread throughout all AFL clubs, including the two new franchises at the Gold Coast and western Sydney. 'Why would you want to do that?', Sheedy said of creating an all-Indigenous AFL club:

The one thing that really makes our game is spreading the talent right throughout the whole nation. Otherwise it ends up becoming exactly what you don't want. I would rather have the spread of (Indigenous) players so we build a nation together. That's not probably nowhere near where the AFL would want to go. They want a spread of talent, so let's enjoy it in everybody's camp.<sup>32</sup>

The forthright comment by Sheedy unwittingly exposes the true nature of the relationship between the AFL and Indigenous Australia. Instead of the highly progressive institution that the AFL brand proclaims itself to be in the public arena, the participation and inclusion the league so proudly and loudly proclaims is in fact severely restricted to on-field playing roles. In this way reconciliation is limited to what is possible within the current institutional power structures of the AFL. As an institution formed in the same decade as the Australian government, the AFL continues to reflect the colonial heritage of its origins. The AFL, like the Australian Government, remains a place of whiteness dominated by middle-aged, white 'Anglo-Saxon' men. In other words the AFL is an organization whose current power structures reinforces rather than breaks down the colonial domination and dependence of Indigenous Australia. Indigenous Australians are acutely aware of this, as the response to Sheedy in the *National Indigenous Times* indicates. Alerting us to the strong parallels that exist between the limited approach the AFL and Australian government have adopted in respect to reconciliation and Indigenous self-determination, Chris Munro writing on behalf of Indigenous Australian interests asks:

Am I hearing this right? Is this Kevin 'the much-lauded champion of Indigenous football talent' Sheedy talking? I can understand the AFL wanting to pour cold water on the whole concept. That's a given. An all-Aboriginal team would be viewed as 'race exclusive' and 'insular' in the wider public eye. For a football code in the delicate stages of expansion into the western suburbs of Sydney, not to mention the bright lights of the Gold Coast, lending

weight to such an idea in modern day Australia would be public relations suicide. Just ask successive federal governments what happens when you propose to formally embolden and individualise a group of Aboriginal people – you rapidly lose the hearts and minds of mainstream Australia. ATSIIC springs to mind. Ask Joe Regular his thoughts on the elected advisory commission, and you'd get a response along these lines: 'Corrupt mate. They were all dishonest, and half of them were skimming off the top.' I'm hoping most blackfellas know this is utter rubbish, and the nine successive independent audits prove it, but like it or not, that's the streak of mud that's stuck to ATSIIC since its demise in 2005. So unfortunately, whether you're talking sport or politics, mainstream Australia's your bread and butter.<sup>33</sup>

Munro succeeds in exposing the AFL's claims to be a leader in race relations as being seriously flawed and the league's approach to Indigenous Australia as unremarkably consistent with the past and present practices of Australian government that can rightly be described as neo-colonial. The opposition Sheedy (and the AFL) has to the advent of an Indigenous team franchise joining the national competition might be read in purely sporting terms, that an All-Indigenous team would come to dominate the competition and dampen public interest in the code. Adopting a more critical reading we believe that such opposition says much about the racism that continues to inform the AFL and its relationship with Indigenous Australia. The formation of an Indigenous team requires not only playing personnel but a group of non-playing personnel to successfully manage and operate the franchise. Opposition to an Indigenous team in the AFL reiterates the racist imperatives of colonial Australia which tells non-Indigenous Australia that Indigenous people are incapable of management, self-determination and facilitating their own success. While accepting sporting arguments against an All-Indigenous team, we believe that a franchise controlled by the Indigenous Australian football community should one day soon be admitted to the AFL. What better way to achieve reconciliation and anti-colonial, anti-racism in sport than to dream of a situation in which Indigenous CEOs and coaches control the playing destinies of kids from the white ghettos of Adelaide, Melbourne and Perth.

### **Concluding remarks**

The coalition of AFL-accredited journalists, the front office and respective clubs comprises a controlling alliance which effectively obtains persistent domination of subordinate groups such as players, supporters, television viewers and newspaper sports section readers. This is not an overtly coercive act or process but a result of the partly unconscious act of acquiring rules, dispositions and values. This occurs through the elaboration and penetration of ideas and assumptions – such as those pertaining to Indigenous biological determinism, Indigenous ambition, and the AFL as a pioneering leader in race relations – into common sense and everyday practice.

While acknowledging the relative success of the AFL in raising public awareness of Indigenous Australia, our research draws attention to the work yet to be done. Adopting a critical approach we have sought to show how the stories of former colonists that Langton speaks about continue to shape contemporary knowledge about, and relationships with, Indigenous people within the professional Australian Football industry coordinated and controlled by the AFL. We argue that the current situation in which the increase of Indigenous playing personnel has not been met with similar increases in the promotion of Indigenous Australians taking up positions of power and authority in the AFL in non-playing positions – from coaching staff, recruiters, administrators, player managers to club and league board members – is indicative of old racial and cultural prejudices

persisting in new and less obvious forms. Relating these ideas to the theoretical insights of Hall, and Jhally and Lewis we believe that genuine reconciliation and self-determination within the context of the AFL will require nothing less than the formation of an Indigenous AFL franchise that is controlled by Indigenous people and which enables them to participate in Australian Football on their own terms. The Indigenous franchise is not intended as an Indigenous-only organization. Indeed, the Indigenous leaders would and should be able to recruit the best and most suitable players. The Indigenous franchise may indeed have more non-Indigenous than Indigenous players. The establishment of an Indigenous AFL franchise will allow the AFL and its alliance of boosters to genuinely lay claim that it is 'an agent of social change' by providing and supporting genuine leadership and management opportunities for Indigenous Australians. At the moment, race relations are simply more of the same.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Herald Sun*, May 24, 2002, 108.
- <sup>2</sup> Demetriou, 'Above and Beyond'.
- <sup>3</sup> P. Smith, 'Sodden League dries out as AFL expands'. *The Australian*, March 21, 2009. <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,25217464-12270,00.html>.
- <sup>4</sup> Hallinan and Hughson, 'The Beautiful Game', 4.
- <sup>5</sup> Hall, 'The Whites of Their Eyes'; Jhally and Lewis, *Enlightened Racism*.
- <sup>6</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics. It should be noted that here is considerable discussion concerning the meanings of these figures. For example, Spaaij and Westerbeek have noted that a person only needs to play sport once during the 12 months prior to interview to be included in the participants category. Spaaij and Westerbeek, 'A Healthy Active Australia?'
- <sup>7</sup> Godwell, 'Playing the Game'.
- <sup>8</sup> For extensive discussion and analysis see Hallinan, Bruce and Coram, 'Up Front and Beyond the Centre Line'; Hallinan, 'Aborigines and Positional Segregation'; Tatz, *Obstacle Race*; Coram, 'Race Formations'; Hallinan and Judd, "'Blackfellas" Basketball'; Judd and Hallinan, 'Hoop Dreams'; Bruce and Hallinan, 'Cathy Freeman'.
- <sup>9</sup> Mulvaney, *Australian Aboriginal Prehistory*.
- <sup>10</sup> Chesterman and Galligan, *Citizens Without Right*; Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*; Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians*.
- <sup>11</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Online Resources*.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>13</sup> Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council, *Online Resources*.
- <sup>14</sup> Langton, 'Well, I Heard it on the Radio'.
- <sup>15</sup> Attwood and Arnold, *Power, Knowledge and Aborigines*.
- <sup>16</sup> Hallinan, Bruce and Coram, 'Up Front and Beyond the Centre Line'.
- <sup>17</sup> Turner, 'Media Texts and Messages', 203.
- <sup>18</sup> Phil Mercer, BBC Sport Online, 19 August 2001.
- <sup>19</sup> Hand, 'Sheedy Shoots Down Idea of Indigenous AFL Club'.
- <sup>20</sup> Interview data.
- <sup>21</sup> Michael Long's position as the AFL's manager for Indigenous development is a notable exception. However, in this role there is relatively little power in decision making of the AFL. Chris Johnson is an assistant coach for Brisbane. There are approximately 150 assistant coaches in the AFL.
- <sup>22</sup> Hall, 'The Whites of Their Gyes'.
- <sup>23</sup> Interview data.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>26</sup> H. Heard, 'Police Reach Out To Youth on Melbourne River'. *Melbourne Leader*, February 10, 2009, 12.
- <sup>27</sup> Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*.
- <sup>28</sup> St Louis, 'Sport, Genetics'.
- <sup>29</sup> Johnston, *Racial Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody*.



- <sup>30</sup> M. Sheahen, 'Perkins Looks a Right Charlie Now'. *Herald Sun*, May 25, 2000, 65.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>32</sup> Hand, 'Sheedy Shoots Down'.
- <sup>33</sup> C. Munro, 'No Chance for 'our' own Team Without Sheedy'. *National Indigenous Times*, July 23, 2008, 20.

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