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## 'Nah, we're not racist'

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Gecko. It's the privacy-protecting pseudonym for the AFL club you might just follow.

And, for three academics who undertook an unparalleled examination of prejudice and discrimination in football, this team was trouble from start to finish.

Among nine AFL sides that opened their inner sanctums to researchers, Gecko stood out because it promised things - like senior and assistant coach involvement in interviews and surveys - and failed to deliver. The club did, however, provide some invaluable material. Just in ways most would consider unexpected from a team in Australia's richest and most popular sporting code that prides itself - justifiably - as a trailblazer in tackling racism.

The players began their participation in the landmark study belligerently and dismissively - and then ended it by racially taunting their club's player development manager in front of researchers.

The case study of Gecko is a glaring stain in a 148-page report entitled *The biggest game in town: a analysis of the AFL's vilification policy*.

If there's a saving grace in what transpired at Gecko headquarters, it's that the events underscored the need for the visiting researchers. A half-hour assembly of Gecko's playing list for a written survey on racism and prejudice began with an overt challenge from one footballer.

"Why do I have to do this?" was the tenor of the question. This inspired a teammate to pipe back: "Why wouldn't you want to do it?"

Unfortunately Gecko's senior coach and his assistants simply didn't turn up to the AFL, federal government and Victorian Office of Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship-funded exercise. This was despite clear invitations and precedents at rival clubs where head coaches showed genuine support and interest in the project, which saw researchers spend three years conducting interviews at AFL clubs.

But back to Gecko, where doctors Sean Gorman, Dean Lusher and Keir Reeves weren't surprised by the rowdiness of the team. Well experienced in the business of surveying sportsmen, they knew the absence of coaching authority meant it could be this way. What the academics could never have predicted, however, was what occurred when their survey session with Gecko ended.

As they submitted their questionnaires, a handful of footballers openly directed a racial insult to their own player development manager - a man of non Anglo-Australian background, unlike 78 per cent of Gecko's playing list.

Then, looking the researchers in the eye and smiling, the players employed sarcasm: "Nah, we're not racist," was the remark that was documented.

Another lasting image from Gecko was the sight of a lone, Indigenous player helping the researchers tidy up a room left littered with questionnaire papers and pens.

The academics are bound by confidentiality agreements and Gorman and Lusher stressed that a witch-hunt to uncover the AFL club's true identity would miss the point.

But the blot in a complex cultural examination that, among happier findings, concludes overt racism in AFL playing ranks is a relic because footballers now know it's plain wrong, cannot be ignored.

The report also finds that AFL players who know the history behind their code's no-ifs, no-buts stance on racism are in the minority.

Asked who of Jim Stynes, Chris Lewis, Michael Long or Nicky Winmar was catalyst of the AFL's landmark anti-vilification rule 30 in 1995 (now rule 35), most of the more than 360 surveyed drew a blank.

Example after example of what the researchers term "casual and nuanced" racism from players and clubs were tabled.

Documented amid all this were stories of gut-wrenchingly blatant racism experienced by Aboriginal AFL players in their everyday lives.

In one-on-one interviews with researchers that in some cases exceeded an hour, players entrusted these stories to the project in the hope that it might help.

At "Charlie" football club a senior Aboriginal player detailed how he and his Indigenous teammates felt stereotyped when it came to drinking alcohol after hours. Aboriginal players tended to socialise in isolation as a consequence, he said.

Another Charlie player, of multicultural background, privately tabled his concern about how rap music with references to "niggers" was played in the gym and how this might insult Aboriginal teammates.

At "Delta" club, an Aboriginal player recalled how he and his dad left an AFL game early due to racism being hurled at former Richmond player Jarrod Oakley-Nicholls.

Another senior Indigenous footballer gave the impression it was commonplace for him to hear racist taunts like "black c---" from supporters in stands at AFL games. Especially when he played in Melbourne.

At "Foxtrot", an Aboriginal player detailed to the academics how he had felt belittled by police officers. The same player also shared how he was rejected by a chemist when trying to get a painkiller prescribed to him by his AFL club doctor. He detailed how his non-Indigenous partner was able to walk into the same pharmacy and buy his medication.

These events occurred in isolation, but the clear view of the AFL footballer was that there was a commonality: both transpired because of his race. At only one of the nine clubs surveyed did an Aboriginal player feature on the list of "culture setters" nominated by peers. The most significant general research finding for the AFL and AFL Players Association to address is the fact Aboriginal footballers said they were still refraining from pursuing vilification grievances. It emerges through the report that the game's Aboriginal elite have been talking about this among themselves for years.

A generous Indigenous player interviewee from club "Bravo" explained: "I think the vilification act is really supportive but I still know quite a lot of our players,

Indigenous boys, who don't put their hand up and say, 'This has happened'. At every Indigenous camp we talk about it and you still have four or five players who put their hand up at the conference who don't put their hand up after a game after being vilified."

The AFL and AFLPA have had the academics' report since December 10.

The players' association has been in regular contact with the researchers and told The Sunday Age last week about how it welcomed the wealth of material and intended to use it in rewriting its best-practice guidelines for Indigenous players.

The AFL has only acknowledged it received the document.

"I would really love the AFL - and it would be cost-effective and it would be quick - to go in and survey all the clubs, not just nine. So do another sample of the entire organisation," Gorman said. "I would love them to go down to the second tier. The SANFL, the VFL and the WAFL. Until then you can only be speculative about how far the code has really come in this area."

Gorman believes this is a significant juncture for the AFL. One where a forensic examination of the great work done has highlighted how much work still remains.

Disagreed with statements 78.5%

"Gay males sicken me because they are not real men" and agreed with "I am accepting of gay men"

Disagreed with statements such as 93.8%

"A real man can get any woman to have sex with him" and "Some women are only good for one thing"

Agreed with such prompts as 26.3%

"It's natural for men to get into fights"

Disagreed with "anti-Indigenous" survey prompts such as 51.2%

"Aboriginal Australians are getting too demanding in their push for land rights"