

## I found racism runs through the AFL – it has failed to uphold the rights and safety of Black players

By *Héritier Lumumba*

*I have no desire to sit down with Collingwood – the same organisation that has worked to publicly discredit my truth*

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Héritier Lumumba leaves the field with a cut eye during a Collingwood game in 2014. Photograph: Ryan Pierse/Getty Images

**It is only right that I begin this piece by paying my respects to the First Nations of this land. As someone whose roots lie in the global Black community, the African diaspora, and the Indigenous peoples of both Brazil and the Congo, my story is familiar to many. To young Black people fighting for their rights and dignity worldwide, I see you: you continue to be my inspiration.**

**For the entirety of my 12-year career, the AFL failed to address racism that permeates its organisation. In my view, it repeatedly failed its duty to uphold the human rights and workplace safety of its Black players.**

**This claim should not come as a shock to anyone. There is a well-documented history of racism within the sport, seen as recently as last week when Eddie Betts was vilified online by an AFL fan comparing him to a chimpanzee. Even Adam Goodes, a champion of the game, was forced out by an overwhelming and relentless culture of racism that the AFL failed to address.**

Since 2014, the Collingwood Football Club has been actively denying the facts surrounding my experiences of racial discrimination in the workplace – namely a culture of racist jokes and ideas, as well as the fact I was reprimanded and ostracised for speaking out against Eddie McGuire for his racist comments about Goodes. Rather than take responsibility for years of discrimination so it can evolve as an institution, Collingwood chose to pit its powerful public relations machine against me, attacking my credibility and wilfully misleading the public.

In 2017, *Fair Game*, a documentary chronicling my struggles within the AFL over six years, was released. In the aftermath, four former teammates confirmed important facts surrounding my experiences of racial discrimination at Collingwood.

Instead of taking responsibility as institutions responsible for the wellbeing of their employees, Collingwood and the AFL both deployed a strategy of silence and denial. I had been public about my battles with mental health; this was now used as a means to discredit me. Media outlets ran with the narrative, happy to simply recycle the idea that I was an unstable Black man, rather than question and investigate whether a macho, white-dominated industry could possibly be operating within a framework of institutional racism.

On Monday I was notified that Collingwood would be conducting an “internal investigation” into my claims, in order to discover the “truth”. Many are wondering why I will not participate in this process.

It is an insult to suggest that I have done anything less than tell the “truth” for the last six years. I have expressed this truth directly to the AFL via board members of Collingwood and the Melbourne Football Club, administrators and players at both clubs, the AFL Players’ Association, AFL club-affiliated psychologists and psychiatrists, and the Australian public via a feature-length documentary and interviews with almost every major media outlet in the country.

I have no desire to sit down with the same organisation who have worked to publicly discredit my truth, so that they can decide on its value.

For Collingwood to now suggest it will “investigate” itself is disturbing. There are now six former teammates of mine who have gone on record to confirm facts that prove there was a racist culture at Collingwood during my time there.

I am not seeking an apology. I am demanding a public acknowledgement of the facts they have tried so hard to deny.

First: based on the public testimony of seven former players including myself, that there was a culture within the organisation that cultivated and condoned racism, resulting in me having to endure nine years of direct racial discrimination.

Second: that Nathan Buckley, PR manager Stephen Reilly, and club president Eddie McGuire categorised my standing up to McGuire’s racism as throwing him, and the club, “under the bus”. This was echoed by Buckley during the last time I ever spoke with him – during an exit meeting in 2014.

As part of their announcement about the internal investigation, Collingwood stated it would not be making further public comment until its investigation was complete. But just on Wednesday, Buckley told a press conference that the only time he ever heard a racist nickname was when it came out of my mouth. This, he said, was his “truth”.

The same day, McGuire made a similar denial and said the object of the inquiry was to find “everyone’s truth”. When pressed, he refused to speak further because of the pending investigation.

Is this the process I am supposed to honour? One that violates its own terms within 48 hours of being announced? Where club officials can continue to publicly discredit me, then hide behind the silence of “due process”? Am I really expected to go through an investigation where we all acknowledge our “different points of view” about what was objectively the result of a culture of racism, and people can simply rewrite history then claim it as their personal “truth”?

How many victims of racism have been silenced this way? This is a global moment of reckoning. Around the world, Black people are tired of being silenced, abused and dehumanised. We do not trust the structures that dehumanised us to also deliver us justice.