

Indigenous round highlights how far AFL has come but there is still work to be done

While celebrating the likes of Eddie Betts and Lance Franklin it is worth considering just how many brilliant Indigenous players we may not have seen



The Eagles' Lewis Jetta performs a dance after kicking a goal against the GWS Giants at Domain Stadium. Photograph: Daniel Carson/AFL Media/Getty Images

Craig Little
29 May 2017

From Shaun Burgoyne's match-winning performance under lights at the SCG on Friday night, to Jeff Garlett's five goals in Alice Springs on Saturday and Lewis Jetta's dance in Perth on Sunday, to watch football over the past few days was to celebrate the enormous contribution Indigenous Australians have made to Australian football.

That both Burgoyne and Garlett wore number 67 to celebrate 50 years since the 1967 referendum that affirmed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were to be included in the census further emphasised the meaning of these performances. After hearing of the massive "Yes" majority back in 1967, Pastor Doug Nicholls, for whom the AFL's Indigenous round is named, proclaimed it was "evidence that Australians recognise Aborigines are part of the nation".

They are irrefutably a big part of our game, and the weekend was *another* reminder of the wildly outsized contribution by its stars, particularly Buddy Franklin and Eddie Betts. Both are routinely spoken of in terms of their *magical* abilities, seemingly ignoring the years spent perfecting their skills. If they were truly magical, they would

conjure a game where they'd be free to ply their trade without the menace of racial abuse.

While celebrating the contribution Indigenous Australians have made to football it is worth considering just how many brilliant Indigenous players we may not have seen – those who left the game because of the shit they copped along the way. It is worth noting that only 18 Aboriginal men had played in the VFL between 1906 and 1980.

There is a widely held premise that politics should be kept out of sport. Sport should be the place where an increasingly polarised society can set aside its ideological differences. The reality, however problematic, is that those differences aren't set aside at the football, instead the game has been used as cover to amplify them. And in 1993, in the wake of Mabo and Paul Keating's Redfern speech, those differences were cranked up to 11.

Betts and Franklin were still learning the game as six-year-olds when on a dreary April afternoon, the considerable talents of Nicky Winmar and Gilbert McAdam shone through the acidic abuse at Victoria Park, a venue that according to academics Matthew Klugman and Gary Osmond "had a deserved reputation as the most feral real estate in all of football".

Imagine the devastating impact the abuse would have had on a young Betts and Franklin were they within spitting distance of the Collingwood social club members drunk out of their gourds that day. You suspect they'd have been lost to the game – and to football fans – forever. But what young Indigenous kids would have seen that day was as Klugman and Osmond highlight in their brilliant account of that day, *Black and Proud: The Story of An Iconic AFL Photo*, "at once a searing protest and a powerful 'statement of presence' and identity... something new to the protest images of Indigenous Australians – a clear declaration of pride".

Standing near the Collingwood cheer squad after the final siren had sounded, Winmar lifted his guernsey and pointed to his bare skin and declared: "I'm black – and I'm proud to be black!"

It was statement that said so much more. It says I cannot be ignored. It says I have taken you on my own terms and my brother and I have just kicked your arse. It says fuck you – deal with me *and* my Aboriginality.

The two almost identical images taken that day by photographers Wayne Ludbey and John Feder capture a moment that Dr Sean Gorman, a research fellow at the Centre for Aboriginal Studies at Curtin University, says "was either Winmar's most public private moment or his most private public moment". Whatever it was, it transcended the realms of sport and football.

"It was socially, culturally and politically important; it tapped into a national discussion that needed to be had," says Gorman.

Winmar's defiant reply that day was so powerful it helped start the conversation around racism in sport. It was a conversation whose exclamation point was made by Michael Long's defiant stand against racial vilification two years later – a stand that

directly lead to the AFL creating Rule 30, the first Australian sporting law prohibiting racial vilification.



Former St Kilda player Nicky Winmar with the famous photograph of him at a launch in 2013. Photograph: Hamish Blair/AAP

The type of racial vilification suffered by not just Winmar, McAdam and Long, but by generations of footballers at all levels of the game, is thankfully rarer today and incidents of racial vilification by spectators, while not as rare, are more isolated. But

significant questions remain concerning racism in football, and the image of Winmar lifting his jumper and pointing to his skin is a powerful and important symbol that should be seen as an undeniable call for change that is yet to be fully realised.

In this light, the past weekend should be seen not just as a celebration of the contribution of Indigenous Australians to our game (albeit one that remains underrepresented in coaching and administrative ranks) but also as an occasion to reflect on how far football and Australian society has come, as well as a reminder that there is still a way to go.

“We haven’t come as far as we’d probably have liked,” says Gorman. “We still grapple with issues around race, with history, and a whole range of things we find difficult to talk about, and Adam Goodes’ situation was a perfect example of that.”

Just two years ago, the Adam Goodes war cry dance was part of the Winmar-Long cultural continuum of speaking up as an Aboriginal man after years of serial booing that was racist and unjustifiable. Right-wing shock jocks found the imaginary spear throwing to be offensively violent, a lie to hide their discomfort at a man calling on his own cultural heritage to make a powerful and proud statement of his Aboriginal self, to an audience who booed him for their own shallow, self-entertainment.

“We will look back on Adam Goodes in 10 or 20 years from now as another watershed moment,” says Gorman. “Only when that happens will we come to a greater understanding of how important a gesture that was.”

While things have improved, the Indigenous studies scholar Barry Judd refers to the current AFL culture as one of “enlightened racism”. Racial abuse is not tolerated, but many racial assumptions continue to go unquestioned.

This is something Gorman understands well, having recently undertaken a study with Dean Lusher, a research fellow in the Department of Psychology at the University of Melbourne, into how racism is reflected in club culture.

The report shows that all the AFL players and coaches interviewed understand that player-to-player vilification is unacceptable, and the vast majority saw racial vilification as a thing of the past.

That we’ve come this far is testament to the ongoing work of the AFL and the AFLPA in educating players and promotion issues around social justice and equity more broadly.

However, that is not to say there is not work to be done, with the report identifying that there remains a racism issue treading under the surface.

“Primarily, Aboriginal players are on the periphery of their clubs – culturally, in a friendship setting and socialising.”

Hopefully this is something the AFL and AFLPA will continue to address and is part of a journey begun by Pastor Doug Nicholls and walked by Nicky Winmar, Michael Long, Adam Goodes and others.

A large part of that journey is to look back at the ground we've covered. This week there was news of a campaign to honour Nicky Winmar's iconic stand against racism with a statue. To fully appreciate the context of that moment, perhaps we could consider carving a hole deep into the ground where the Collingwood social club once stood. Here the people of Abbotsford could fill it with hard rubbish as well as piss and leftover beer to reflect that the air was once noisome with bigotry and the reek of the outer's foul clogged toilets, all while they reflect on the words of former Collingwood president Allan McAlister carved into stone as an epitaph:

“As long as they conduct themselves like white people off the field, everyone will admire and respect them.”

It would be unpleasant, foul and confronting, particularly to football's nostalgia buffs, but that's kind of the point. It would be a subterranean admonition to bring into relief the defiance – the open challenge – of Winmar's gesture, but also remind us of how far we've come, what we've left to do and the debt we owe to not only the Indigenous champions of the game, but those we were denied celebrating.