

## ‘Masquerading in plain sight’: Why there’s no quick fix to Australian sport’s racism fight

By Vince Rugari  
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Sport, as Nelson Mandela once said, has the power to change the world. It also has the power to stop change in its tracks and set the prevalent societal norms and expectations in concrete.

Both sides of this coin were encapsulated by Eddie McGuire’s trainwreck of a press conference on Monday. On one hand, Collingwood had indeed taken a brave step forward by commissioning an unflinching report which described the AFL club’s culture of “systemic racism”, and the enormous chasm between what Collingwood says it stands for and how it acts.

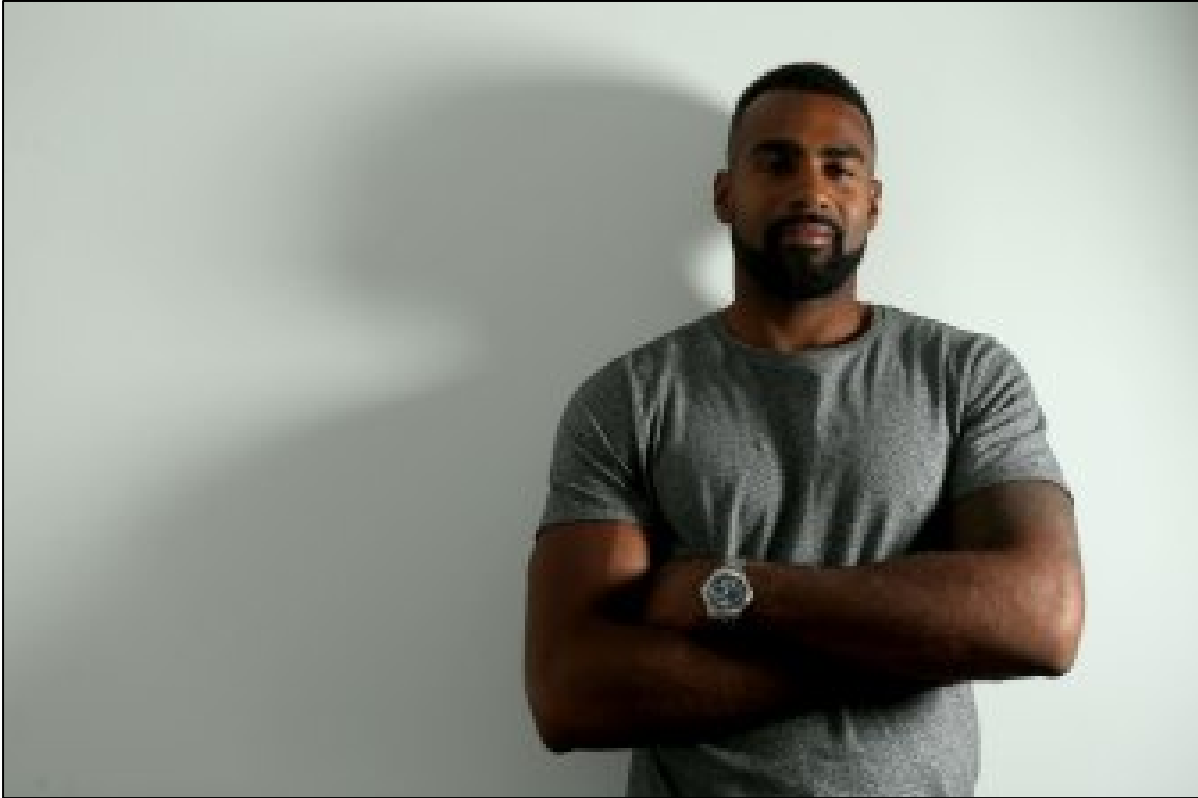


*Collingwood CEO Mark Anderson, President Eddie McGuire and the club’s Integrity Committee member Jodie Sizer during a media conference into the report that found “systemic racism” at the club.*

But by trying to spin the leaked report as a “proud day” for the club, not a sombre one, and by striking a defensive, at times even flippant tone, McGuire demonstrated that he, as Collingwood’s most senior leader, was still not ready to stare down the problem.

The *Do Better* report was triggered by the claims of Heritier Lumumba, the former All-Australian defender who described the culture at Collingwood as a “boys’ club for racist and sexist jokes”, and said he was regularly subjected to nicknames like “chimp” and “slave”.

Lumumba's case is directly linked to the shameful Adam Goodes saga: the racism he experienced, after all, intensified once he took McGuire to task on national television over his misguided comments on the Sydney Swans champion, who was hounded into retirement by relentless booing from crowds.



*Heritier Lumumba's allegations of a racist culture at Collingwood should come as no surprise after decades of casual and structural racism within Australian sport.*

You don't have to look too far to find more instances of Australian sport's awkward reckoning with racism. Collingwood is the common thread between almost all of the AFL's high-profile cases, from Robert Muir in 1980 to Nicky Winmar in 1993, Michael Long in 1995 and Goodes in 2013. Australian rules football might be the unfortunate industry leader in this regard but every code, to varying degrees, has had its issues.

Just last month, Indian fast bowler Mohammed Siraj complained to officials about racist abuse from the SCG grandstands. The instinctive reaction from many Australians was to deny that it happened at all - that Siraj was just upset that he'd been hit for consecutive sixes and was therefore making it up - despite Cricket Australia's later confirmation that he had indeed been subject to racial abuse.

It's not like it doesn't happen. In October, eight people were ejected from Central Coast Stadium after Penrith NRL winger Brent Naden reported racial abuse. And thanks to social media and its cloak of anonymity, there is a brand new avenue through which athletes can be racially insulted.

Why does this keep occurring? Largely because sport is a reflection of society, and racism in its various forms is still a problem in all walks of Australian life. Sport can also be a vehicle for social change, but when it comes to actually stopping racism, it has often been found wanting.

Researchers have discovered that racism is sadly as prevalent, if not moreso, in grassroots sport, where future stars, coaches and administrators are born.



*Nicky Winmar's famous stand in 1993 was supposed to be a watershed moment for the AFL.*

A Monash University study in 2018 of 34 different team and individual sports in the Melbourne area found that 17 per cent of participants had heard racist language in the past two weeks.

A separate qualitative study in the same year looked specifically at junior sport, with a series of more than 100 interviews conducted with players, coaches, club leaders and parents at nine clubs across five sports. It concluded that on-field racism was a “common everyday occurrence”, that many instances went unreported, that those who spoke out against it experienced backlash, and that official grievance processes intended to remedy racist episodes were ineffective and likely to exacerbate the trauma of children who had been vilified.

“If it’s happening on-field, you can be sure it’s happening off-field,” says Professor Karen Farquharson, the head of the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Melbourne, who led the study.

“On-field is one manifestation but it’s actually structured in a way where kids get allocated to teams - the kind of roles kids have on the teams, the positions they’re put into, are all shaped by racist stereotypes.

“Basically, black players get positions that don’t lead to off-field leadership. Their talent is considered [a result of natural] talent, not hard work. That is a part of structural racism, it’s how the sport is organised.”

This is why just condemning racism isn’t enough, as Lumumba said on the ABC’s 7.30 this week.

On-field vilification, at least at the elite level, appears to be on the wane. Players are increasingly making a stand when they hear it from the general public - even if that leads to the sort of treatment Goodes, Lumumba, Siraj and many others have experienced.

But it’s the less obvious forms of racism that linger - the invisible mechanisms that limit athletes of colour from ascending to post-career roles in coaching, administration or even media and contributing their experiences and world views to sport’s power base. That lack of diversity instead feeds into the problem, as noted by the *Do Better* report, and it becomes a vicious cycle.

“There’s still this massive resistance,” says Francis Awaritefe, a former star of the National Soccer League who himself experienced on- and off-field racial abuse during his playing days. He is now the chair of Professional Footballers’ Australia and sits on the board of FIFPro, the global soccer players’ union.

“Somehow it’s only white former players rather than black former players who are qualified when it comes to coaching, or senior management roles, or roles on boards,” he says.

“It’s a difficult topic for Australians. There’s this self-denial about the scale of it. When you have a history that is built on colonialism and imperialism, when you look at that and you factor that in, you come to see why we are where we are.

“On the field, sport can be the ultimate meritocracy. It’s about equality, respect, fair play. And yet, when we look at the way clubs and sometimes a game itself is governed, we don’t live by those principles.”

Slowly, the wheel is turning. The Black Lives Matter movement has brought the discussion to the mainstream - but symbolic support from sporting organisations only goes so far.

The AFL last year severed ties with Rio Tinto, which had sponsored their Indigenous programs, in response to the mining company’s destruction of a 46,000-year-old sacred Indigenous site in the Pilbara.

It only did so after being called out for its hypocrisy by then-Essendon star Joe Daniher and Ben Abbatangelo, a former Big Bash League cricketer, writer, and the deputy chief executive of the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience.

Abbatangelo has a new target: Cricket Australia's deal with Woolworths, which is attempting to build one of the largest Dan Murphy's stores in the country in a vulnerable Aboriginal community, in spite of furious local resistance.

"Throughout the summer, the players (and staff) posted black tiles on social media, they took a knee almost every game in the Big Bash and did countless PR stunts denouncing racial discrimination," he says.

"Whatever was easy, trending, or of no cost, they did it. What has CA done about this? Nothing. Racism masquerades itself in plain sight ... [this] is the perfect example."

The extent to which racism is embedded in everyday life makes racism in sport "hard to tackle", according to Professor Farquharson.

"That doesn't mean we shouldn't be tackling it - we of course should, but we need to recognise this is not a quick fix," she says.

"Critical race theory basically says that white people won't change anything until either their interests converge with non-white people or it becomes too embarrassing to not do anything. In the 1990s, the on-field vilification became so blatantly bad, the community was saying 'this is absolutely unfair' - finally that caused the AFL to act on that.

"That hasn't happened with the off-field stuff yet, and perhaps it needs to happen next."