

Watson's words speak for too many Australians in Goodes debate



Adam Goodes was repeatedly vilified by some AFL fans towards the end of his playing career.

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There is a principle I remember from my failed law studies: “It is not every slip or mistake that imparts negligence.”

It is the law’s way of saying that before defining someone as negligent, you have to look beyond errors and one-off mistakes, and see if they have *form* in the field.

Which brings us to the Essendon great and now radio commentator Tim Watson, who on Tuesday found himself in a world of pain after wading into the subject of Adam Goodes declining an invitation to join the AFL’s Hall of Fame. On his *SEN Breakfast* program, Watson said he was “surprised that [Goodes] rejected it”.

Watson strained to demonstrate he was not remotely in the camp that so viciously and disgracefully booed Goodes in the final years of his career, nor in the camp led by the likes of Alan Jones that maintained such booing was no big deal in the first place and wasn’t racism, it was just fans not liking the way he milked penalties, etc. (Don’t get me started. He seriously said that!)

“I’m trying to put myself in his shoes,” Watson said, “which is always a difficult thing to do because of the journey that he’s travelled, where he was in the last couple of years of his career, the reception that he received when he played, the fact that he didn’t feel like the game itself – being the administration of the game – supported him around that period of time.”

But then Watson began digging a hole for himself.

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“[I’m surprised] because I would have thought ... he’s been retired for five years, I would’ve thought in that five years repatriation had taken place and that the damage that occurred at that time, I thought it might have eased on him mentally and he might have been able to repair some of those bridges between himself and the game and feel differently about his time and then just appreciated all the great things about the game that were delivered to him and that he earned for himself.”

And that’s where the trouble started. The key offence caused by Watson’s words was the notion that it was for Goodes to repair the bridges between him and the game, and the insinuation – at least in the way many critics took it – that the game had given Goodes so much, so why couldn’t he just get over himself and accept the honour the game wanted to give him?

Social media melted down.

The likes of journalist Robert Lusetich led the charge in an eloquent takedown: “As if Adam Goodes is the one who needs to be repairing bridges that were nuked by those hiding behind other reasons to boo him. Adam is the only one with his pride and integrity intact in that entire mess. The AFL, and Australia, let down Adam Goodes, not the other way around. What happened to Adam Goodes is a travesty. Anyone who can’t see that needs to look in the mirror, not wonder why he hasn’t repaired bridges.”

The view of my friend, the sports commentator Francis Leach, was also emblematic: “Just forgive and forget, because, you know, it’s footy! They still don’t get it.”

Bingo. Bingo.

In that whole imbroglio, allow me to say I am entirely on the side of Lusetich, Leach and, indeed, Goodes himself. There is not a word Watson said that I agree with.

But it is not every slip or mistake that imparts negligence.

Watson does not have any history of racism, and is a fundamentally decent man. Those obtuse comments he made did not come from the same place as the bone-ignorant booing from the revolting racists who turned on Goodes in 2013 and never let up.

They came, in my view, because Watson just doesn't get it, and the point is, whole swathes of Australia are still just like that.

In terms of the Indigenous experience in this country – just how appalling it has been in this country – I personally didn't get it either until I read a book a decade ago on the Myall Creek massacre, which opened my eyes. I knew things had been bad, historically, but I had no idea *how* bad.

When it came to Goodes' experience, I certainly didn't get that until I saw Ian Darling's documentary *The Final Quarter*, which allowed us all to see up close for the first time just how appalling his treatment was. The vilification. The nastiness. The mass racism, with whole crowds booing his every touch of the ball. Before seeing it, I guess I felt Goodes might have occasionally come up against racism in his career, but Jesus wept! THAT shocking? I had no clue.

I came away reeling, just from watching it. What was it like for Goodes to be on the receiving end of it, to *actually* live with that kind of treatment from AFL fans and toxic commentators such as Jones?

I have no clue, genuinely, no clue. I can imagine, but even then I suspect I am not even close to understanding the horror and hurt. None of us with comfortable white lives – starting with Tim Watson and myself – can. Only Goodes can know, together with those who have lived that kind of experience.

The way forward for this country to heal?

It is to isolate or ignore the genuine racists. Their bigotry goes clear to the bone. And we need to talk to the others, to make those who still don't get it start to understand. Goodes himself has changed the conversation, and that has started to change the country.

We just need to keep talking to each other.