

Perth is proof AFL can emulate Dreamtime experience outside of Victoria

Indigenous heroes of Australian football, and their communities, hail from all parts of the nation



Teams line up before start of the Dreamtime match between Essendon and Richmond at Perth's Optus Stadium.

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Mon 7 Jun 2021

Followers of Australia's Indigenous game have a dream. They dream that the acronym of the code they love will one day mean what it should and resonate with those who live outside the cloistered stronghold of Victoria. Essentially, those whose postcode does not begin with a three, dream that one day the "A" in AFL is no longer a derisive symbol of branding spin but illustrative of a sport that truly belongs to the entire nation.

There are many things the AFL can do to raze its VFL facade. The most pertinent of these things will sadly take many years, but there is a soft kill in Gillon McLachlan's crosshairs just waiting to be claimed. The annual Dreamtime clash between Essendon and Richmond should without further ado be released from the MCG as its default home and rotated around the nation.

Thanks to Covid-19, the showpiece fixture of Sir Doug Nicholls Round was moved to Darwin in 2020 and to Perth this year for the same reason. Both occasions were a roaring success but Saturday night at Optus Stadium proved beyond doubt that the concept must be leased to any pocket or flank of Australia that can do it justice.

With precious little time to organise – organisers and the West Australian public were given less than a week’s notice – Perth put on a show that will be hard to beat by any event this year, the grand final included. Tickets to the game were snapped up as if the Beatles were making a comeback, with the game officially sold out within 24 hours – the crowd of 55,656 stands as a 2021 record for the ground – and both pre- and half-time entertainment hit the mark respectfully and eloquently.

“It talks about the respect we have, and the state has, and the city of Perth has for Indigenous culture, particularly the Noongar, who have made a great contribution not just to football but to society here in WA,” Optus Stadium chief executive Mike McKenna told AFL Media last week. “I think it will set a new benchmark.”

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McKenna and his team delivered. The AFL now knows the Dreamtime experience can be emulated, even enhanced, in other parts of the country. At its core, the annual Dreamtime fixture is not about the Bombers or the Tigers but about something more important than football. Coveting the game’s tenancy at the MCG which, prior to Covid-19 had played host since the concept’s inception in 2005, makes no sense at all.

Sharing the love should not be a consideration but a no-brainer; Indigenous heroes of Australian football, and their communities, hail from all parts and the game has a duty to recognise this by honouring their states of origin.

In addition to paying homage to the Indigenous people that are spread far and wide, the AFL stands to reap the benefits of growing the game that sharing one of its big-ticket events would bring. It’s a trick McLachlan has missed by locking away the grand final at the MCG until 2057 so to sincerely nationalise the game – or at least be seen to be striving for it – steps elsewhere must be taken.

Dreamtime should be recognised for what it is and what it can do for the game; it is low-hanging fruit ripe for the picking. Encouragingly, the concept of shopping it around the nation is not a pipedream but a movement that is gathering momentum.

“I think the AFL nature of footy now, rather than the VFL, means we can do that and we probably should do that now,” Richmond senior club advisor Neil Balme told TAB Radio last week. “It does make sense to play something like this on the MCG when you can actually sell 100,000 tickets. But to take the event other places does make a lot of sense as well, particularly with the commitment to the Indigenous or Aboriginal part of it. It’s almost endless, the possibilities.”

If the AFL starts now by meeting consumer demand and exposing Dreamtime to a wider audience, the possibilities might well be endless. By 2057, it is to be hoped the game’s ruling body will have had enough practice at munificence that it might take a similar stance when it comes to the grand final. But for now, governing the game without fear or favour to any state will progress in baby steps.

While Balme’s views are a nod to the long view of the AFL’s niche in the national landscape the proof in the pudding of Saturday night’s success can be found in the

words of Michael Long, the former Essendon great who led 6,000 people on the Long Walk across the Matagarup Bridge to Optus Stadium.

“It was magnificent, overwhelming that we got that many people here,” Long said on Fox Footy. “Just being here the last three days, the amount of talk and looking forward to the game, and now tonight displaying the culture and history of the Noongar people is just fantastic.”