

Opinion

The trope at the heart of Cyril Rioli's retirement

By Jack Latimore
Indigenous Affairs Reporter
2nd April 2022

In a long meeting with *The Age*, she still becomes emotional recalling the events of 2018 - Rioli had been contracted until 2020 - and becomes equally moved when trying to explain her husband's impact upon communities across the Northern Territory and upon his place of birth the Tiwi Islands. "It has such a big impact on him, it's difficult to explain the effect he has on people, and it means so much."

Rioli's time at Hawthorn was a golden era for the club, but it was also a time when the club paid lip service to cultural awareness, largely through lack of education. It was a time when Rioli watched the battles encountered by teammates, notably his fellow Hawk of two years Amos Frank from the remote APY Lands of far north-west South Australia as he navigated the impossible task of becoming an elite sportsman without anywhere near the required support.

Shannyn said those who called her response to Kennett an over-reaction could never understand its context in the events over the years that preceded it. She recalled when a young Indigenous player - still playing with another club - moved in with the Riolis in late 2012 the club was not happy with the influence of his partner and pushed her to return home. She remembered the manner in which a club official spoke to a young relative of the Riolis when he accompanied her into the rooms one post-game occasion.



Cyril Rioli in action during the 2015 AFL grand final

She recounts an incident on an end-of-season trip in 2013 when a senior player asked teammates whether the partner of one of his Indigenous teammates was “also a boong”. The Indigenous player was at the table at the time. “Cyril found out about it,” said Shannyn, “and was very upset, but when it went to the leadership group they told him to ignore it and just said: ‘Don’t worry about it’. No one in the leadership group stood up to act.”

Added Rioli: “Nothing really happened. We spoke about it, but it was like: ‘You’re there to play footy.’ You move on, but we should have dealt with it. Being young and not really knowing how to deal with it was hard.” Of the Indigenous teammate, Rioli said: “He was really hurt about it.”

Shannyn urged the club to improve its cultural awareness. In 2012, while working with the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, she emailed the Hawks’ welfare officer regarding the club’s Indigenous programs but says she received no response. In 2016, she suggested to Clarkson that the club introduce cultural awareness training, but again she said she received no meaningful response.

In 2015, the Hawks’ Indigenous programs were gifted \$1 million over five years from the Epic Good foundation in an announcement that heralded the appearance of Rioli, Burgoyne and their three Indigenous teammates just days after Hawthorn supporters had booed Adam Goodes at the MCG. Rioli remembers he and his teammates meeting about Goodes and wishes now he had spoken up.

The club’s subsequent appointment of highly rated Indigenous liaison officer Leon Egan lasted barely one year with Egan only employed one day a week. The club has said the million-dollar funding was largely spent on Hawthorn’s community programs at Katherine. Now the welfare officer role has been mandated as full-time by the AFL and the Hawks appointed Brady Grey two weeks ago.

Cyril Rioli remains in Darwin, where he is working with young Indigenous offenders at First Step, an alternative sentencing and youth diversion program. He has worked with the Northern Territory Thunder and is open to working back in the AFL system, passionate about coaching young Aboriginal men and women, but said he wants no part of being associated with Hawthorn’s Reconciliation Action Plan. “If they want to use my image or get me to the club I want to be paid,” he said. “I deserve that.”

Estranged from Hawthorn and only occasionally in contact with associates from his Hawthorn days, such as former club football boss Mark Evans, Rioli did not watch his former teammate Lance Franklin’s successful quest for 1000 goals last Friday night, but enjoyed the highlights. Of his AFL playing cousins Daniel and Willie Rioli, he said: “I send them random messages every now and then, but I probably should watch a few more of their games and give them more feedback.” His favourite player right now is Kysaiah Pickett.

Rioli “respectfully declined” an invitation from Clarkson to go fishing while his former coach was recently in the Northern Territory. Clarkson had reportedly set

aside several days in a bid to spend time with Rioli, who many believe had become estranged from the majority of his former teammates. “Alastair’s wanted to come up and throw a bone to me,” Rioli said. “He wanted to go fishing, but it was short notice and my boat was in service.”

Should Shannyn choose to remain in Melbourne for the long term, Rioli is open to relocating, but he added of the wife he has known since she was 13: “It’s her journey and I’m so proud of her.



Jeff Kennett and Cyril Rioli in Rioli’s last season of AFL football, in 2018.

“I would love to work more with young kids and improve their pathways. We haven’t had enough draftees from Alice or the Northern Territory and I think I have something to offer encouraging their development. And I wish we had more player managers looking after their interests.

“They need to know how to look after the business side of footy better and I would advise any young player like me to make sure you are properly looked after and get the right representation.”

Hawthorn’s new coach Sam Mitchell contacted Rioli in December in a bid to make peace between player and club, while also reinforcing a renewed club quest to forge stronger ties with Indigenous Australia. Mitchell told his four-time premierships teammate he was passionate about facilitating change and that he was looking to focus the club’s community involvement away from the Kokoda program initiated by then rookie coach Clarkson and towards the Northern Territory.

Rioli appeared appreciative of Mitchell’s approach, but the journey back to a constructive relationship with the club appears obstacle-laden, particularly while Kennett remains in charge. “I’d be up for helping clubs if they wanted me ... Richmond or West Coast ... but I wouldn’t go back to Hawthorn after what’s gone on. It’s the only club I wouldn’t put my hand up for right now.”