

Opinion

Indigenous players shouldn't be the only ones to stand up to racism

By Mathew Stokes

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“We are unified on this, and never want to see the mistakes of the past repeated.” - *Apology to Adam Goodes from the AFL and 18 clubs in 2019*



Cyril Rioli has recently explained his reasons for leaving Hawthorn and not returning.

Not even three years have passed since the AFL and 18 clubs signed off on that last line when apologising for the treatment of dual Brownlow medallist Adam Goodes.

Yet anger boils within me as I see the same mistakes of the past, ones the game never wanted to be repeated, occur as soon as Hawthorn champion Cyril Rioli and his wife Shannyn outlined why he retired at just 28 with more than two years of a lucrative contract remaining.

I see, once again, powerful men being protected and excused, their behaviour rationalised rather than investigated with consequences awaiting if their actions are found to be racist.

I see an apology from the club that things are better now, without wanting to formally examine what happened in the past and whether action is needed.

Not only that, but I see media commentators – mostly non-Aboriginal – debating whether Jeff Kennett’s comment to Shannyn Ah Sam-Rioli was racist.

At the very least it was, as Shannyn described, “belittling and humiliating,” an action many Aboriginal people would consider to be dripping with a racist flavour. Even allowing that football clubs can be different environments to most workplaces, shouldn’t more be expected from the club’s president when talking to a player’s partner?

After enduring in silence what they saw as inaction from leaders at the club other than Kennett (he was one of three presidents during Rioli’s career), that remark was the final straw for the Riolis.

Think about this: one of the game’s best players of his generation says about the club for which he won four premierships and a Norm Smith Medal, while providing more excitement for supporters than most have achieved in the game’s history, “I wouldn’t go back to Hawthorn after what’s gone on”.

I can only use my experience as a guide and wonder how deep the hurt would need to be for me to not want anything to do with Geelong.

What I haven’t heard are leaders at the AFL declaring loudly that what happened at Hawthorn during Rioli’s career was “completely unacceptable,” as AFL CEO Gillon McLachlan rightly did when audio of former Fox Sports reporter Tom Morris’ misogynistic comments came to light.

I don’t see an investigation from headquarters as occurred when Adelaide’s Taylor Walker made his racist remark, which led to him being suspended for six weeks, apologising and embarking on a process that he has publicly admitted has made him a better person.

What I do see is what I have seen before: club leaders making unacceptable comments and being allowed to continue on after an apology.

I see Aboriginal players being asked to reassure club bosses that the club is going OK in the way it treats its Indigenous players. Who would want to be in Jarman Impey, Chad Wingard or Tyler Brockman’s shoes at any workplace? What were those three players supposed to say, as they prepared for a game of football, when the club approached them to ask whether they felt culturally safe in light of the Rioli revelations? Why should they carry this extra responsibility while navigating their careers?

God forbid there be Indigenous staff members spread throughout the organisation, on the board or working in administration, that the club might ask.

Collingwood are going through the difficult process now of developing stronger processes to handle issues that arise in the wake of their *Do Better* report, and have experts in the area advising the club.

Players do plenty to promote the steps forward the game has made in eradicating racism and promoting Indigenous achievement but at the moment Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander players are crying out for powerful figures in the game to stand up for them. They are hard to find.

We watch, we wait. We don't hear or see action.

Hawthorn must investigate the club culture that led to one of their greatest players leaving the game. It's not a witch hunt. It's called action. Due process is absolutely essential, but here's a moment for the AFL to deliver on the promises they made when apologising to Goodes.

If a club is not equipped to manage a situation where a player asks whether a teammate's wife is "a boong," god help the competition. Key people obviously didn't know what had occurred but what does that say about the processes in place and the willingness of individuals to raise their concerns?

Other clubs and the AFL should follow what the Magpies did when they opened up the culture for examination because many within will know in their hearts that beyond the shiny boots, Indigenous-themed jumpers and government funding, racism remains within the game.

Some clubs seem from afar to run good programs but no club, not even the one I love, is perfect. If clubs can't demonstrate real action then Reconciliation Australia should consider taking away accreditation for their Reconciliation Action Plan.

At the same time the AFL should audit where and how clubs spend money earmarked for Indigenous programs. They can audit football programs, why not these?

We can see what is happening here. It's called white privilege, and it makes me angry.

If this is swept under the carpet, then I don't want to hear platitudes around Sir Doug Nicholls Round. I don't want to hear people saying how deadly the jumpers look or hear about "Buddy" just kicking 1000 goals.

What I want to hear is people keeping others accountable. If that doesn't happen then the game has shown its true colours.

Mathew Stokes is a Larrakia man who played 200 games with Geelong and Essendon. He played in Geelong's 2007 and 2011 premiership teams.