

‘They were too busy winning’: Former Hawks Indigenous manager says club must face its past



Hawthorn's former Indigenous manager Leon Egan.

By Caroline Wilson
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Hawthorn's former Indigenous manager has called on the club to face up to its historical decades-long problem with Aboriginal players and has urged the club to welcome an Indigenous director onto Jeff Kennett's board.

Leon Egan, a father figure to a long line of Indigenous players during the club's most recent golden era, has advised club bosses after Cyril Rioli's recollections about his time at the Hawks that they need to acknowledge Hawthorn's divisive past in a bid to build a stronger cultural relationship with Indigenous Australians.

Egan played under-19s football in 1988 with the Hawks but said he was later told by a senior Hawthorn recruiter that he would never have made the senior grade at the club because of its decision not to recruit Indigenous players. "The club needs to face up to that," Egan said.

Hawthorn chief executive Justin Reeves confirmed he had met Egan at the club this week in a bid to get a greater understanding of the club's Indigenous failings of the past. Of Egan's revelations, Reeves said: "It was really hard to listen to. People are all

talking and saying we need to do more, but at the moment what we are doing is listening and that's everything to me.

“Our priority has got to be to support Cyril and (wife) Shannyn and the family, which we are trying to do. And to make sure we are well positioned in this space as we move forward.”

Egan worked for Hawthorn for four years on a temporary basis as the Hawks' Indigenous liaison officer but, like Rioli and his senior teammate, Shaun Burgoyne, was frustrated and disappointed by the club's refusal to commit funding beyond his one-day-a-week role.

He quit the club after the 2015 grand final when he was refused a pass to the Hawks' post-match premiership celebrations in the MCG dressing rooms, which he described as “the final insult for me”.

Egan said he had chosen to speak publicly because he believed that Hawthorn under CEO Reeves, who took over shortly before Rioli's acrimonious departure, was genuinely trying to make changes at the club, which he said in the past had dealt with Indigenous issues in a “tokenistic” fashion.

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Leon Egan

“I believe he is trying to make the club better,” said Egan of Reeves. “And I want to give him the opportunity to take responsibility to do better and actually acknowledge the past.” The club has not yet committed to an official *Do Better*-style review of its practices, but Egan said Reeves took extensive notes during their lengthy meeting at Waverley Park on Tuesday, which was also attended by the club's new Indigenous manager, Brady Grey.

Of Hawthorn's recent cultural failings, as outlined by the Riolis, Egan said: “They (the Hawks) were victims of their own success. It doesn't excuse it, but that's the way it was. They were too busy winning to worry about issues like putting in place adequate cultural awareness.

“They were so successful that nothing else mattered.”

Burgoyne, who retired last year after 407 AFL games — 250 with the Hawks — confirmed he had repeatedly asked club bosses to expand Egan's role. He also confirmed that he had called a meeting with then club president Andrew Newbold and CEO Stuart Fox in 2015 in the days that followed the constant booing of Adam Goodes by Hawthorn fans at the MCG in late May that year, but that the club bosses found themselves in a difficult position, not wanting to upset their members and supporters.

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Leon Egan

Now an Indigenous manager at Port Adelaide, Burgoyne said had not been aware of the racist slur revealed in *The Age* made by a white player towards an Indigenous teammate in 2013. Deeply concerned about Rioli’s estrangement from the club, Burgoyne stressed that he would always cherish his time at Hawthorn. But Burgoyne also said Hawthorn’s role in the treatment of Goodes remained an ongoing source of great personal regret for him.

Burgoyne and his Indigenous teammate, Jarman Impey, recommended to Reeves at the start of 2021 that the club bring Egan back to Hawthorn in a full-time role. Egan said he appreciated the offer but had chosen to remain in the private sector, where he now oversees his own civil construction business.



Premiership teammates Shaun Burgoyne and Cyril Rioli.

“But I did appreciate the offer,” said Egan, “and Justin knows I will continue to talk to him and hold them to account.” Of the club’s claim that its current trio of Indigenous players had told coach Sam Mitchell they had no cultural issues with present day Hawthorn, Egan said: “Of course, they are going to say that. But everyone there now deserves the chance to do better.”

Hawthorn’s Indigenous players in 2015 — including Burgoyne and that year’s Norm Smith medallist Rioli — were also not aware that Egan had asked a club official for a

pass to the premiership celebrations but were told that the grand final dressing rooms were off-limits to all except immediate family members.

“To so many of those boys, I was their family,” said Egan. “I was just so disappointed and that was the final insult for me. I went into the club a few days later and handed in my resignation. I didn’t want to worry the players about it. I just left.”

The club also turned to Egan in 2018 after the exchange between Hawthorn president Kennett and Shannyn Ah Sam-Rioli, which Cyril Rioli described as “the final straw” for the couple who have outlined a number of racial red flags they encountered over Rioli’s 11 years at the club.

One key regret for the couple was that Egan, a trusted adviser and father figure, left the club too soon, was not replaced the following season and was employed only one day a week. Egan and his wife, Kate, housed a number of Hawthorn players over the years including Jed Anderson, James Sicily, Impey, Jermaine Miller-Lewis and Dayle Garlett, along with Richmond’s Shai Bolton.

The Hawks could only find the funding to pay Egan one day a week over a period in which the club regularly recorded seven-figure profits and had received significant sponsorship for Indigenous programs from the Epic Good Foundation. This was also at a time when it was regularly recruiting Indigenous footballers from around Australia.

The dearth of Indigenous footballers came to an end at Hawthorn in 1999 when Chance Bateman — the club’s first Aboriginal 100-gamer — arrived from Perth. Under coach Alastair Clarkson, the club was transformed with the recruitment of Lance Franklin, Rioli, Burgoyne and Bradley Hill among others. Three Indigenous players — Chad Wingard, Impey and Tyler Brockman — are on Hawthorn’s 2022 list.

A former policeman, Egan’s extensive Australian rules football experience included long-time roles with AFL SportsReady, a company dedicated to improving the employment pathways for young Australians, AFL Victoria and the Clontarf Foundation.

Of his time as a teenage aspiring VFL footballer during the late 1980s, he said: “Maybe I wouldn’t have been good enough anyway, but I later found out it wouldn’t have made any difference at the time. Maybe that was partly why I wanted to make an impact when I went back to the club.”

After departing Hawthorn, Egan was ultimately headhunted by the AFL Players Association in 2018, coming heavily recommended by Burgoyne among other senior Indigenous players across the competition, to run the players’ union’s Indigenous and multicultural programs. He still advises the AFLPA and a number of AFL clubs, and ran a cultural awareness session at Geelong Football Club on Thursday.