

Heat on Kennett as Rioli goes public with racism claims at Hawthorn

- *Indigenous star says president's comments to wife were "final straw"*
- *Rioli says 'gaslighting' at club hastened his retirement in 2018*



Cyril Rioli kicks another game-winning goal during his glittering 189-game career at the Hawthorn Hawks.

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Jeff Kennett has come under increasing pressure to step down as president of AFL club Hawthorn after revelations about treatment of star indigenous player Cyril Rioli that led to the four-time premiership star's premature AFL retirement in 2018 at the age of just 28.

In a report in *The Age* on Saturday, Rioli said he will not return to the club while Kennett remains in his post. The four-time flag hero's stance is the result of a series of issues that Rioli said fractured the relationship between Hawthorn and its Indigenous players during his time there between 2008 and 2018.

Rioli said an alleged incident at Launceston Airport during Indigenous round of that year was the "final straw" of a series of other events with regards to the Hawks' relationship with their Indigenous players.

It is alleged Hawthorn president Jeff Kennett commented on the designer ripped jeans of Rioli's wife Shannyn Ah Sam-Rioli, offering loose change to help sew them up — comments Kennett claims was a joke.

"I felt belittled and humiliated," Ah Sam-Rioli told *The Age*. "The club kept saying I was overreacting, but they were portraying me as the angry black woman. They said later I had wanted to go home to Darwin for a while. That's not right."

Cyril Rioli subsequently boycotted training and it led to crisis meetings at Hawthorn involving the likes of Kennett, football boss Graham Wright, coach Alastair Clarkson, Rioli's manager Adam Ramanauskas and teammate Shaun Burgoyne.

Kennett sent text messages to Rioli and even wrote a letter to the couple in a bid to make peace, insisting he was joking about the jeans. But the damage was done, with Rioli telling *The Age* the incident was 'eye opening.'

"I've never really spoken about what happened in Tassie, but I think there was a lot of gaslighting at the end of my career by the club," he said. "It was the final straw. It opened my eyes ... seeing how they were to us."

The Riolis have gone public with multiple allegations of racist behaviour at the club, including an incident where a 'senior player' asked teammates on a post-season trip in 2013 whether the partner of an Indigenous player present at the time was 'also a boong'. Such behaviour was the impetus for Shannyn Ah Sam-Rioli repeatedly urging the club to improve its poor cultural awareness practices.

However, they believed insufficient actions were taken in response. The Riolis returned to Melbourne after two weeks in Darwin. There Ah Sam-Rioli said Kennett spoke over her during a meeting in the offices of Rioli's TLA management. It paved the way for Cyril Rioli to announce his retirement days later, bring down the curtain on a glittering career of 189 games for Hawthorn that included him winning the 2015 Norm Smith Medal and three All-Australian selections.

"Junior (Cyril) only ever wanted to finish his career at Hawthorn," Shannyn Ah Sam-Rioli told *The Age*. "He wanted to retire at 30, that was always his plan. But he was retired at 28. I feel guilty. I still cry myself to sleep at night wondering if I made my husband walk away from his career."

The Launceston exchange came after a challenging 2017 for the Riolis including the death of Cyril's father, Cyril Senior, to a heart attack. Cyril Sr. was a champion footballer in the Northern Territory and the brother of Richmond's Norm Smith Medallist Maurice Rioli. Cyril Rioli Jr.'s mother Kathy is the sister of Essendon's two-time premiership player and 1993 Norm Smith Medallist Michael Long.

But the proud Tiwi Islands family's status as AFL royalty seemingly counted for little. "It just hurt so much and it hurt her," Rioli explained. "I just thought I don't need to take that shit, so it was fight or flight and I said, 'let's get out of this shit storm'."

In response to the revelations, prominent Hawthorn supporters group Hawks for Change called on Kennett to immediately step down.

Former Victorian premier Kennett's second term as Hawks president is due to end in December next year. But Hawks for Change, which successfully supported former AustralianSuper boss Ian Silk in his bid to win a spot on the club's board last December, has been pressuring Kennett to set an earlier date for his departure. Silk is one of several possible candidates to take over.

Hawthorn on Saturday released a formal apology to the Rioli family for racism they experienced at the club. "Racism in all shapes and forms is unacceptable," the statement said. "We are sorry that Cyril and Shannyn experienced these incidents during their time at the club.

"We are saddened these experiences have left them feeling the way they do," the statement continued. "Combating racism and educating everyone both within our own walls and in the community is something we are constantly working on and believe we are getting better at."