

Generation next ready to shine as Impey calls for greater Indigenous presence across the AFL



The new generation: Carlton's Jesse Motlop, St Kilda's Ben Long, Essendon's Tex Wanganeen, and Richmond's Maurice Rioli jnr ahead of Sir Doug Nicholls round.

By Jon Pierik
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The clans of Rioli, Long, Motlop and Wanganeen have been responsible for some of the league's iconic moments, and the latest generation of Maurice Rioli jnr, Ben Long, Jesse Motlop and Tex Wanganeen were at the MCG on Monday, ahead of two rounds in which First Nations Australians' heritage will be celebrated.

Rioli jnr couldn't wipe could not wipe the smile from his face at the prospect of playing in his maiden Dreamtime at the 'G in front of an expected crowd of more than 70,000 on Saturday night.

"It's a very big game for all Indigenous players. You get to represent all of your family from back home, and your culture," he said.

"Obviously, it will be a dream come true. Since it came into the AFL, I have wanted to play in it. It will be a big opportunity and big achievement to play in this round if I get the chance."

However, it was one of the new generation's more experienced brethren, Hawthorn star Jarman Impey, who said while there had been progress made in his time, including through a greater media presence, more could still be done when it came to indigenous inclusion throughout the AFL.

This progress has included a mandated indigenous liaison officer at all clubs, although this is generally a part-time role.

“For us, we have plenty of support, which is absolutely fantastic. We have got liaison officers in every club now which is a great tick for us. We have been absolutely rapt with that support,” Impey said.

“It would be nice to see some past players in the system, indigenous players around the system, and giving their feedback and helping the younger ones come through but, at the moment, I am pretty happy where everything is at. We can always improve with support and getting educated, but we are happy right now.”

Impey admitted it was a two-way street, though, as just because former players and potential employees had the skills, that did not necessarily mean they wanted to work at a football club.

“The more the better. It would be nice to even get them in the physio department, help us wherever they can. Coaching would be great,” Impey said.

“That would be a good one to start with. We are slowly starting to see indigenous people in the media, which I think is a great thing. But all over the platform in the AFL would be a great thing to see more indigenous people.”

Impey isn't alone in his thoughts. Dual Geelong premiership star Mathew Stokes, a Larrakia man from Darwin, made his feelings clear in his column in *The Age* in January.

“Will they [the AFL] examine why it is that, despite one in 10 AFL players being Indigenous, only about one in every 100 people spread beyond the locker room into clubs, the AFL, the media, player management, coaching, sports science and within executive ranks are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders?” Stokes wrote.

“And will clubs think about how to set Indigenous players up to succeed post playing in such areas so a range of perspectives and voices exists in all areas of the game?”

Senior AFL executive Travis Auld said the league was working to improve in all areas.

“Our commitment extends far beyond just the round itself. We all share that responsibility and, in many ways, we have to take some responsibility off the boys ... as a competition, I feel that, I feel the weight of that and the responsibility of that, as does everyone who works within our competition,” he said.

Impey has been an important and vocal leader with the Hawks. He had recommended in 2021 that Leon Egan, then the club's former indigenous liaison officer, return in a full-time role but that was rejected.

The Hawks now have Brady Grey in a liaison role, and he has been involved in attempting to ease the dispute four-time premiership star Cyril Rioli and his wife Shannyn Ah Sam-Rioli have with the club. The Hawks last month apologised to the pair for the racism they had experienced at the club.



Hawthorn star Jarman Impey.

Under new coach Sam Mitchell, the Hawks are working to improve relations with Rioli, and hope he will be on hand when they face the Gold Coast Suns in the Northern Territory in round 11.

“My relationship with him is totally fine, looking to hopefully see him when we are in Darwin. That would be an awesome moment for us,” Impey said.

Is he confident Rioli will attend? “Always. It would be great to see him and, hopefully, we can make that happen.”

Speedy small forward Rioli jnr has impressed since debuting in round seven, and looks forward to lining up alongside his nephew and three-time Tigers’ premiership player, Daniel Rioli, on Saturday.

Tex Wanganeen has not played at the senior level since his third senior game, in round four, but the young forward hopes to earn a recall in a struggling Essendon side on Saturday.

“The decision is up to the coach now. I have done all I can,” he said.

“It would be a dream come true, just to wear the jumper, representing my culture and my tribe and all the family members, just doing the indigenous boys proud.”