

## The day Indigenous AFL star turned off the TV in disgust



*Chris Lewis and Byron Pickett at last year's AFL grand final.*

By Jake Niall  
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When Chris Lewis heard the boos for Adam Goodes from West Coast fans, the two-time premierships Eagle and Indigenous pioneer footballer turned off his television.

“I was very disappointed when my club got involved in one those games [when Goodes was booed] and I turned it off actually,” said Lewis, casting his mind back to 2015.

Lewis, speaking this week ahead of the league's Sir Doug Nicholls Round, has an unequivocal view of the Goodes saga that divided opinion within the game, and about which the AFL prevaricated before a belated apology to the Sydney champion some time after his 2015 retirement.

“I was disgusted, actually. I thought that was one of the biggest blights on the game in 50 years,” said Lewis. “Got persecuted by crowds because he decided to stand up and voice his opinion on what really happens in this country.”

Lewis' position on Goodes is born of personal experience. He, too, was booed throughout his career and also endured a level of racial vilification on the field that went well beyond most players, in part because – as he and opponents have acknowledged – there was a strategic objective of distracting a highly skilled player from doing his job.

If Lewis was disappointed with those West Coast fans who hooted Goodes in Perth (still at Subiaco then), his recollections of his career are even more sobering for Victorian fans who might consider racism to be more virulent on the other side of the continent.

Lewis, a Yamatji man who grew up in Perth's northern suburbs and attended Christchurch Grammar (where his father had been dux), had never been subjected to on-field racism until he entered what was then the VFL, aged 18, as a foundation West Coast player in 1987.

"I grew up playing juniors and I got selected [for West Coast] when I was 18. Prior to being 18, I never had experienced racism on a footy field," he said. Lewis' story contains a sizeable "what if" element, in that, by his own admission, his considerable talents were not fully realised over those 13 years (he retired early in 2000, prior to the season), 215 games and two premierships.

The crowd abuse was most prevalent, especially at the old suburban VFL fortresses where fans were closer to the players. "It was numerous occasions on a yearly basis and they mainly happened in the old suburban grounds like Windy Hill and Victoria Park and Princes Park."

Could his career have been better had he received better protection from the game? "Quite possibly, yeah. Quite possibly, it could have been [better]."

"If I'd played for a Victorian club, I don't think that would have happened [racism] ... it would have been on a minor scale.

"In saying that, things happened to a lot of people." While proud of his accomplishments in a somewhat brilliant career, Lewis believes Mick Malthouse moving him from the midfield to the forward line mid-career also contributed to his reduced output. "I was not playing in the middle. At the end of the day, I should have worked a little harder."

Lewis said he had entered "the old VFL" and a competition that was "transitioning in to what they [the AFL] are today".

He added: "In terms of supporting me, no they didn't. But I think they were aware of what was going on ... they were discussing the policy of racial vilification and then obviously, it didn't start to gather some momentum until Nicky [Winmar] did his thing [1993]." The AFL's vilification code was not introduced until 1995, in response

to Michael Long's complaint – and mediation – with Damian Monkhorst on Anzac Day.

There's a photo of Lewis in September of the same year of Winmar's famed finger-point to his dark skin at Victoria Park, in which Lewis also bares skin – part of his buttock – to what the caption says was an abusing North Melbourne fan. Lewis quipped: "Probably sums me up. I show my arse. Winmar lifts his jumper up and gets immortalised."

Lewis was among the most combative players of his era and his fuse encouraged opponents to both needle him physically and resort to racial abuse of a kind that would result in lengthy suspensions – and far greater condemnation of the perpetrator – in today's AFL.

Lewis went before the tribunal 14 times for an aggregate of 23 matches missed – a full season lost, in essence, his offences including the exotic charges of biting (three matches) and spitting at an opponent (three matches) as well as regulation striking.

Lewis felt that his position as a talented player for West Coast, the new club that threatened Victorian dominance, also contributed to both racial vilification and physical needling of him.

"I think playing for the Eagles was a fair bit to do with it, because you know, we were the first new side that made inroads into winning in Melbourne and winning grand finals.

"I was pretty passionate about my game ... I didn't like some of the attention I was getting, so I wasn't going to sit there and cop it. The only way we could sort of retaliate was playing good footy or giving as good as what we got. I wasn't going to allow them ... to let people dictate to me what they can't say, can do and that sort of stuff."

Lewis was booed at considerable volume in the 1991 grand final against Hawthorn at Waverley Park, on the same afternoon he was subjected to on-field racial vilification, an apparent attempt to get under his skin by highlighting his skin colour.

In addition to racist abuse, Lewis said there were "a lot of the other times, it was just an underlying tone there that made the game physical and aggressive and unfortunately I got a bit frustrated at times."

That a measure of the racial abuse of Lewis was calculated, rather than spontaneous (which is still appalling), was reiterated by an opposing player of that era. "He was so good we looked for a way of putting him off," said that former player, who asked not to be identified and "regretted terribly" the harm inflicted on Lewis.

The football culture of Lewis' era was one that sanctioned winning at almost any cost, as evident in the tolerance, not simply of racism, but on-field brutality and salary cap cheating.

West Coast, whose chief executive Trevor Nisbett was football manager in the successful Malthouse decade that largely aligned with Lewis' career, have more or less acknowledged that they might have done more on behalf of their Indigenous star, who also started in a competition with far fewer Indigenous footballers.

"The club got better at that sort of stuff ...," Lewis said. "They understand the issues that me and a couple of other boys may have faced in our careers when we were playing down there.

"I talk to 'Nisy' [Nisbett] quite regularly ... I was made aware that they thought they probably could have done things better."

The environment for Indigenous players in the 2022 AFL has improved markedly in comparison with Lewis' lot. He recognises the progress – and how hard his road was – while cautioning that there are still outbreaks of racism, as seen in the Taylor Walker incident of last year.

"Obviously, it's brought out in the open a bit more, which is great for people to have a discussion on the issue.

"Unfortunately, it [racism] still rears its head now and then. Yeah, it's sort of sad when that sort of stuff happens." Lewis said the Indigenous players, "the system and the AFL have brought it out of the shadows and into the spotlight and it's become a bit more open to the public and the players to have an opinion on that situation."

Today, Lewis lives up at Port Headland, where he drives a train for mining giant Fortescue. Lewis also has an interest in "Inside 50", the player management group headed by his ex-West Coast teammates Paul Peos and Chris "Muddy" Waterman, which handles Richmond's Sydney Stack, among others.

Lewis' train journey is from Port Headland to Fortescue's three mines, a trip that he says is about 300 kilometres south-east, into the continent's interior.

Whether the game – and society – have travelled metaphorically further than 300 kilometres in race relations compared with his time, Chris Lewis has a clear road map for what should be the standard now.

"No young person should come through and have to put up with stuff because they look a bit different to the rest of the people, or they play a bit different," he said.