
RESEARCH REFLECTIONS:

RACISM IN AUSTRALIAN FOOTBALL – WHITE AUSTRALIAN RULES!

by Barry Judd

The Australian Football League (AFL) has positioned itself as the national sporting brand mostly closely associated with the process of reconciliation and the non-tolerance of racism in sport. The AFL was the first professional sporting body in Australia to combat on-field racism by adopting its Anti-Racial and Religious Vilification Laws in 1995.¹ At the same time the AFL also became a strong public voice for reconciliation through events such as the annual Dreamtime at the G match, recognition of an Indigenous Team of the Century and a tacit acknowledgement of marn-grook as one precursor to the contemporary game.² Coinciding with the political dominance of the Howard government (1996–2007), AFL advocacy of Indigenous issues made it the most important national institution in promoting a contemporary Australia inclusive of Indigenous people.³

It is argued here that in this respect the AFL assumed a de facto national leadership role in Indigenous affairs to the extent that it claims expertise on issues concerning Indigenous Australia. Validation of these claims has been proclaimed with widespread media reference to significant increases in the number of Indigenous players participating in AFL competition since the 1980s.⁴ While constituting just 2.3 percent of the national population, Indigenous people accounted for 11 percent of all playing personnel in the 2010 season of the AFL.⁵ These increases in the public visibility of Indigenous people playing the game have been used to portray the AFL as an institution that has moved beyond the paradigm of Australian racism. The AFL, according to narratives popularised in the media, has achieved reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people that positions Australian Football as the indisputable ‘national game’.

In this article, I argue that although the achievements of the AFL in promoting Indigenous Australia have been of national significance, work to make Australian Football a game that can be truly shared by Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians alike remains unfinished business. I do so by reflecting on my experiences as a researcher of Indigenous people and Australian Football as well as

personal experiences of the game as a spectator and club member who views Australian Football from an Indigenous perspective. In the context of discussions about the role of the law in professional sports, the various reflections I make concerning the operation of racism in Australian Football suggest that racism has come to be considered according to the narrow legal definition provided in the Anti-Racial and Religious Vilification Laws of the AFL.⁶ My reflections suggest that legal solutions concerning on-field racial sledging do little to address the racist discourses that are omnipresent in Anglo-Australian culture and that work against the game’s claims to fully embrace Indigenous Australians as equal partners in the ‘national game’.

ENLIGHTENED RACISM IN THE CONTEXT OF AUSTRALIAN FOOTBALL

My understanding that the rhetoric of anti-racism and reconciliation in fact constitute new tropes of racism within Australian Football is informed by my own decade-long interest in the relationship between Indigenous Australia and Australian Football. Working in the field of Australian Indigenous Studies, I have been most interested in how discourses of Anglo-Australian nationalism have structured popular understanding of the Australian Football in ways that have excluded Indigenous people from participating, or at least participating openly, in the ‘national game’.⁷ More recently I have been interested in how discourses of Anglo-Australian nationalism have metamorphosed into narratives that represent Australian Football as a sport that openly embraces Indigenous participants and celebrates the long-standing contribution Indigenous people have made to ‘our’ game.

The contemporary relationship between Indigenous people and Australian Football can best be understood as shaped by forms of ‘enlightened racism’. The term ‘enlightened racism’ was first used in a media study of sitcoms in the United States, in which authors Jhally and Lewis found that the main black characters in the *Cosby Show* were portrayed in ways that confirmed and reinforced white idealisations of contemporary American race relations.⁸

The authors concluded that:

[D]espite appearing to break down racist beliefs, the program fostered a mode of racial tolerance which they termed 'enlightened racism'. While white viewers could admire the affluent, black characters in the program for being 'just like us' in striving to attain the American Dream, they simultaneously were able to deny the relevance of systematic class and racial barriers faced by the majority of black Americans. Black viewers welcomed the 'positive' portrayals, but they too adhered to the American Dream, viewing the Cosby scenario as both desirable and achievable.⁹

Applying the concept in Australia, Hallinan concluded that the growing overrepresentation and media visibility of Indigenous men in the AFL had led administrators, commentators, scholars and fans of Australian Football to similarly idealise race relations in this country.¹⁰

In an article I later co-authored with Hallinan, we again applied the concept of enlightened racism to the context of Australian Football.¹¹ The article concluded that racism in Australian Football did not end with the adoption of anti-racial vilification laws or AFL support of reconciliation. Rather, longstanding Anglo-Australian nationalist narratives about Indigenous Australians continue to inform the attitudes that the football fraternity hold toward Indigenous people, underpinned by a form of enlightened racism. Stereotypes that dominate the stories of former colonists' popular imagery of the Australian Aborigine as 'childlike', 'physical', 'savage' or 'noble

savage', 'intellectually lacking', 'stone-age', 'out of time', 'exotic' and 'hunter-gather' remain informative in the culture of Australian Football.

These stereotypes were reflected in a survey of club recruiters, in which we found the belief that Indigenous people bring a different skill set to the game because of racial and cultural attributes born out of 40,000 years of hunting and gathering to be widespread.¹² Lightning reflexes of hand and foot, super-fast acceleration and a different sense of time and space are racial and cultural attributes that make Indigenous players a highly sought after commodity in contemporary Australian Football. Exposing the processes in which 'old-fashion' Anglo-Australian nationalist discourses of race have persuasively morphed into forms of enlightened racism has been useful in drawing attention to the continuities that exist between past and present understandings of Indigenous people that inform the culture of the AFL. The ways discourses of racism operate and have been openly transformed in the context of Australian Football are processes that I have witnessed, both in my role as researcher and in my role as father of an impassioned aspiring footballer.

EXPORTING ENLIGHTENED RACISM: THE AFL IN SOUTH AFRICA

In August 2009, I visited Johannesburg and Cape Town for a second time. I had travelled to Africa to investigate the high profile initiative of the AFL to develop Australian Football as the code of choice in post-Apartheid South Africa.¹³

What I saw confirmed that racism within the AFL had taken enlightened forms to the extent that even African youths from impoverished and disenfranchised townships now appear to have a place in Australian Football. Australian Football in South Africa draws from the experience of 'national leadership' that the AFL had developed in the arena of Indigenous affairs and is similarly spoken of in the language of improvement, development and enhancement of opportunity.¹⁴ Black South Africans are a people treated unjustly in the past and who deserve that most Australian

Russell Crowe with South Sydney Rugby League Club players
Wayne Quilliam



of concepts, a 'fair-go', in the present. The South African experiment is about the practice of enlightened racism insofar as Indigenous and non-Indigenous representative teams from Australia are used to sell an image of the game that projects an idealised picture of Australian race relations. Indeed, extensive use is made of visiting Indigenous representative teams especially those from Northern Australia as a strategy to showcase Australian Football as a game in which the barriers of racism do not exist.

ENLIGHTENED RACISM AND YOUTH PROGRAMS: PROFESSIONAL INDIGENOUS PLAYERS AS ROLE MODELS FOR CHILDREN

If my experience in South Africa seemed to confirm that the AFL had shifted the game from exclusionary to enlightened forms of racism, further proof was apparent at a football clinic I attended with my son at the Hawthorn F.C. As a member of the 'Junior' (Rioli) Club, a category of membership named for the Indigenous player Cyril Rioli, my son participated in a clinic which featured several Indigenous players, including current stars Rioli and Lance 'Buddy' Franklin. In the autograph hunt that occurred at the clinic's completion, I noticed that my son and hundreds of other participating children bypassed the several non-Indigenous players who also took part and made a beeline for Rioli and Franklin. I watched as these two Indigenous men were mobbed by the crowd of primary-aged children eager to connect with their football heroes. During the drive home I asked my son why he and the others had sought out the Indigenous players first. He responded with an answer he believed to be so self-evident he called me silly for asking the question. He said the brown (Indigenous) players are the best! Furthermore, the clinic suggested that the game had indeed shifted from a position of racial exclusion to that of enlightened racism, to the extent it enabled non-Indigenous, middle-class kids from across suburban Melbourne to celebrate Indigenous masculinity in a way unimaginable in previous decades. In the 1970s, when I was a 6 year old, the idea that I, or my friends, would have Indigenous men as our role models whose deeds we would aspire to emulate was unthinkable.

In the wake of these experiences I started to believe there was something to the much vaunted statements of the AFL that claimed racism overcome and reconciliation achieved.¹⁵ My research enabled me to recognise and object to such claims as based in enlightened racism.¹⁶ However, I had to acknowledge that despite the insidious discursive heritage that these newer forms of racism had originated from, and the false claims they made in idealising Australian race relations, they nevertheless had functioned to deliver positive practical outcomes

for Indigenous people enabling them to play Australian Football at the elite level as never before.

OUT IN THE SUBURBS: OLD-FASHIONED RACISM AND AUSTRALIAN FOOTBALL

If the AFL in South Africa and the school holiday clinic at Hawthorn F.C. were first-hand examples of how the discourse of a contemporary, enlightened racism allows for Australian Football to be readily showcased as cause for self-congratulations in the whitestream¹⁷ media, I was soon to learn that the persistence of old-fashioned, Anglo-nationalist racism in the national game is hardly news at all. During the winter of 2010 I became an Auskick parent.¹⁸ Living in the western fringe of metro-Melbourne, a place considered multi-culturally diverse, I expected the local Auskick programme to reflect the diversity that is clearly apparent in my community. I had expected Auskick to include children drawn from 'ethnic' communities including those recently arrived from eastern Europe and the highly visible and 'controversial' arrivals from war-torn parts of Africa.¹⁹ I soon realised that the local Auskick clinic is an exclusively Anglo-Australian domain. To me this was a disappointment, as I want my son to experience racial and cultural diversity in a way that normalises such difference in his young articulation of what it means to be an Australian in the 21st century.

What I was to find shocking, however, was the fact that Auskick, a national youth development program of the AFL designed to introduce Australian Football to children aged between 5 and 10, is sponsored by the sporting goods company Ross Faulkner. The Ross Faulkner Company supplies all footballs used by over 100,000 program participants annually.²⁰ Each weekend of the winter I found myself on a cold, windswept oval playing kick-to-kick with my son alongside the many other locals there to do their fatherly duty. However, for me using the footballs supplied by the Ross Faulkner Company in pre-clinic practice sessions represented one of those moments of the uncanny that is thrown up by post-colonial Australia. Inexplicably I found myself kicking a football that carried the Ross Faulkner 'native' brand. Here on the footballs used by Auskick children aged 5, 6 and 7 years is the 'native' brand that faithfully reproduces 19th century colonial imaginary of the Aborigine: the bearded man, black, with protruding ridges above the forehead. The 'native' holds a returning boomerang in position to release this; the most iconic of all Indigenous artefacts.

As I kicked the ball to my young son, both of us descendants of Australian Aborigines, we found ourselves literally and

symbolically sinking the boot into Indigenous Australia. As this experience came to be repeated throughout the winter, I wondered how the AFL could provide economic sanction to such a blatant, offensive and exclusionary form of colonial racism when elsewhere it has proclaimed itself a national leader in anti-racism and reconciliation campaigns. More importantly, I wondered what impact the use of 'native brand' footballs by the Auskick programme might have in the minds of the hundreds of thousands of young Australians who along with their mums and dads spend their winter mornings kicking the emblematic Aboriginal 'native' around the ground. How does the imaginary of the 'native' brand speak to the minds of Australia's children? I wondered what ideas about Indigenous Australia were being transmitted to our children in this supposed era of post-racism, post-reconciliation Australian Football, by a trademark that speaks to them from the fervent racism of the 19th century frontier.

KEEPING INDIGENOUS PEOPLE IN THEIR PLACE

As I thought more about my Auskick experience and the uncanniness of my weekly collision with the Ross Faulkner Company and its 'native' brand footballs it seemed to me that both new and old Anglo-Australian discourses of race in Australian Football now function to keep Indigenous people in their place. It may be argued that both contemporary forms of enlightened racism and older Anglo-nationalist discourses designed to exclude Aborigines from the 'national game' operate to legislate and police the relationship that exists between Indigenous people and Australian Football.

In this respect, older and newer forms of racial and cultural discourse in Australian Football are surprisingly similar, insofar as each seeks to place specific limits and boundaries designed to legislate the position occupied by Indigenous people within discourses about Australian Football. While enlightened racism promotes the idealised notion that anti-racism and reconciliation enable Indigenous people to participate in Australian Football on the same terms as non-Indigenous Australian, a point the AFL celebrates with reference to the overrepresentation of Indigenous players, this discourse has functioned to contain Indigenous participation to a limited range of on-field playing roles.²¹

The extension of equality within Australian Football is extremely limited, with few if any Indigenous people employed in influential media and sports administration roles that may involve a threat, real or imagined, to Anglo-Australian hegemony. According to boundaries set by enlightened racism, Indigenous people are actively

encouraged to participate in the AFL as players as their racial and cultural attributes make them well suited to the sport. Yet it appears that the racism that informs Australian Football remains highly pessimistic about their abilities to coach, recruit or administer the game as League or club officials. This is a situation that stands in contrast to the National Rugby League (NRL), which makes little noise about the fact that a higher proportion of players from Indigenous backgrounds fill its roster, or that the competition boasts a significant number of Indigenous coaches, off-field staff and a growing presence in the popular media that surrounds the code.²²

The limited nature of anti-racism and reconciliation that apply in Australian Football became obvious when Indigenous media raised the prospect of an Indigenous led club joining the AFL. The reaction against this idea from the AFL establishment was swift and decisive. Kevin Sheedy, a man synonymous with advocacy of Indigenous players, argued that entry of an Indigenous club would set back reconciliation in the game decades. Clearly the notion that Indigenous Australia might flex its collective football muscle via formation of an AFL franchise club is viewed as a threat to the white hegemonic power of the AFL.²³

Analysis of enlightened racism in Australian Football suggests this contemporary discourse of race limits and polices Indigenous peoples' involvement in the AFL to that of public performance. Discourses of enlightened racism that idealise the overrepresentation of Indigenous playing personnel as signalling the arrival of post-race Australian Football therefore do little more than echo the 19th century colonial tradition of 'spectacularisation' of the 'Other', in which indigenes toured in the human zoo.²⁴ Limiting Indigenous participation in the AFL to playing roles maintains the distance between an Anglo-Australian 'Us' and an Aboriginal 'Them'. The fence that divides the field of play from the white spectator provides an impassable frontier that contains the 'native' footballer to his role as exotic performer of sporting 'black magic'. The Indigenous player, limited and constrained to the role of footballer, becomes nothing more than stock, a commodity to be bought, sold and traded by the white power structures of the AFL.

CONCLUSION

Considered in this way, the ascendant discourse of enlightened racism reinscribes Indigenous people as exotic 'Other', as objects of non-Indigenous desire and repulsion, as objects of Anglo-Australian colonial fantasy. The many threads of continuity and convergence that run through racism in Australian Football, new and old, are

clearly apparent. The Indigenous footballer is confined and objectified in ways that render his position that of trademark and he becomes the contemporary counterpart of the 'native' represented by the Ross Faulkner brand.

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- 2 Marn-grook was a cultural practice of Indigenous peoples throughout country that now encompasses the state of Victoria. Some scholars of early Australian Football believe that this Aboriginal practice is an important precursor to contemporary Australian Football. The AFL has at times made reference to this possibility as a means to further develop and enhance relationships with Indigenous Australia. See generally Australian Football League, *AFL & Indigenous Community* (2010) <<http://www.afl.com.au>>. But see Barry Judd, *On the Boundary Line: Colonial Identity in Football* (Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2008); Barry Judd, 'Australian Rules Football as Aboriginal Cultural Artifact (2005) XXV(1) *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 215.
- 3 Chris Hallinan and Barry Judd, 'Race Relations, Indigenous Australia and the social impact of professional Australian Football' (2009) 12(9) *Sport in Society* 1220.
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- 6 Australian Football League, above n 1.
- 7 These were issues I explored in my PhD thesis. See Barry Judd, *Australian Game, Australian Identity: (Post)Colonial Identity in Football* (PhD Thesis, Monash University, 2007) (published in Barry Judd, *On the Boundary Line: Colonial Identity in Football* (Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2008).
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- 11 Chris Hallinan and Barry Judd, above n 3.
- 12 Chris Hallinin and Barry Judd, 'Changes in Assumptions about Australian Indigenous Footballers: From Exclusion to Enlightenment' (2009) 26(16) *International Journal of the History of Sport* 2358.
- 13 ABC, 'AFL targets South Africa', *ABC The World Today*, 13 May 2005 (Zoe Daniel) <<http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2005/s1368092.htm>>; Tom Reilly, 'Taxes fund African footy', *The Age* (Melbourne), 26 March 2010; David Penberthy, 'Aussie code war lands in South Africa' *The Australian* (Australia), 18 June 2010; Daniel Lane, 'South Africa a hunting ground for GWS recruiters as code takes off', *Sydney Morning Herald* (Sydney), 28 March 2010.
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- 15 See Editorial, 'AFL Dreamtime vision helps nation lift game', *The Age* (Melbourne), 22 May 2010; Michael Gordon, *The PM, football and reconciliation* (2 August 2005) European Network for Indigenous Australian Rights <<http://www.eniar.org/news/afl.html>>.
- 16 Chris Hallinan and Barry Judd, above n 3; Chris Hallinin and Barry Judd, above n 12.
- 17 'Whitestream' is a term first applied by Indigenous Studies scholars in North America as a more accurate description of dominant Anglo-American and Anglo-Canadian cultures than the older term 'mainstream'. For examples of the use of whitestream see Claude Denis, 'Indigenous Citizenship and History in Canada: Between Denial and Imposition' in Robert Adamoski, Dorothy Chunn and Robert Menzies (eds), *Contesting Canadian Citizenship. Historical Readings* (Broadview Press, 2002).
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