

Influence of Aboriginal players

Aboriginal footballers had starred periodically at the elite level of Australian Football before the 1980s, but their presence in the AFL has grown enormously in the past two decades.

Their ball-handling and evasive skills have thrilled many crowds. In some cases, the way players of Aboriginal descent have played the game has changed everyone's perceptions about what is possible on a football field.

Unfortunately, it has also taken great courage for many Aboriginal players to play Australian Football as they have had to overcome racial prejudices and a lack of cultural awareness in order to excel at their chosen sport. Thankfully, with innovations such as the AFL's Racial and Religious Vilification Rule and the leadership and actions of such people as Essendon's Michael Long, former Brisbane player and assistant coach Michael McLean and former St Kilda and Western Bulldogs player Nicky Winmar, the football community has gained a greater understanding of the issues confronting Aboriginal players. Their achievements have also made them role models for other Aborigines.

First Aboriginal Player

The first known player of Aboriginal descent to play at AFL level was Fitzroy's Joe Johnson, who played 55 games, including premierships in 1904 and 1905.

In AFL history, only 179 players known to be of Aboriginal descent have played AFL football, but in 2007, there are 71 players of Aboriginal descent on AFL lists, the highest total in league history.

That growth recognises both the ability of players of Aboriginal descent and the clubs' efforts to recruit them.

Geelong's Graham 'Polly' Farmer, who revolutionised the game with his use of handball and was named in the AFL Team of the Century, and Carlton's Syd Jackson were stars of the 1960s and early 1970s. Both were from Western Australia.

A great reference for information about players of Aboriginal descent who have excelled in Australian Football is AFL's Black Stars, published by Lothian Books in 1998.

Aboriginal Footballing achievements

Players of Aboriginal descent have won:

Three Brownlow Medals: Gavin Wanganeen (1993), then an Essendon player before finishing his career at Port Adelaide and Adam Goodes of Sydney in 2003, tying with Collingwoods Nathan Buckley and Adelaide's Mark Ricciuto before winning the award again in 2006.

Six Norm Smith Medals: Maurice Rioli, Richmond (1982); Peter Matera, West Coast (1992); Michael Long, Essendon (1993); Andrew McLeod, Adelaide (1997 and 1998), Byron Pickett, Port Adelaide (2005).

Three AFL Rising Star awards: Byron Pickett, Kangaroos (1998), Adam Goodes, Sydney (1999) and Danyle Pearce, Port Adelaide, (2006)

Six Sandover Medals: Ted Kilmurray 1958; Polly Farmer 1956, 1957, 1960; Barry Cable 1964, 1968, 1973; Stephen Michael 1980, 1981; Phil Narkle 1982; Michael Mitchell 1984.

Most of all, the following players of Aboriginal descent have played in premierships. They are: Winston Abraham (Kangaroos 1999), Shane Bond (WCE 1994), Troy Bond (Adelaide 1997), Peter Burgoyne (Port Adel 2004), Shaun Burgoyne (Port Adel 2004), Barry Cable (North Melbourne 1975, 1977), Graham 'Polly' Farmer (Geelong 1963), Des Headland (Brisbane 2002), Eddie Jackson (Melbourne 1948), Syd Jackson (Carlton 1970, 1972), Chris Johnson (Brisbane 2001, 2002, 2003), Joe Johnson (Fitzroy 1904, 1905), Chris Lewis (WCE 1992), Michael Long (Essendon 1993), Norm McDonald (Essendon 1949, 1950), Andrew McLeod (Adelaide 1997, 1998), Peter Matera (WCE 1992, 1994), Ashley McGrath (Bris 2003), Shannon Motlop (Kangaroos 1999), Byron Pickett (Kangaroos 1999; Port Adel 2004), Gavin Wanganeen (Essendon 1993; Port Adel 2004) and Darryl White (Brisbane 2001, 2002, 2003); Adam Goodes (Sydney 2005) and Michael O'Loughlin (Sydney 2005) and most recently, David Worrup, West Coast (2006)

Nicky Winmar became the first player of Aboriginal descent to play 250 AFL games. Winmar played 230 games for St Kilda and 21 for the Western Bulldogs. He won two best and fairest awards at St Kilda, was an All-Australian twice and won the Michael Tuck Medal as best on ground in the 1996 pre-season grand final.

Qantas AFL Kickstart

The Qantas AFL Kickstart program, implemented in 1997, funds specific development programs for Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, northern Queensland and north Western Australia.

The program is designed to develop Australian Football and promote healthy lifestyles in Aboriginal and Tiwi Islander communities in northern Australia. It also facilitates career opportunities in the AFL.

The relationship with the program emanated from the AFL's Racial and Religious Vilification Rule which was developed in 1995. It is also an extension of the AFL's commitment to indigenous Australians, particularly those in remote northern Australian communities.

The program employs former AFL players as regional coordinators in the Northern Territory, north Queensland and north Western Australia. Most coordinators have an Aboriginal background.

The program aims to lift participation in AFL football at junior level. In older age groups, it aims to identify talented athletes and provide them with a career path to AFL football.

The program includes such activities and initiatives as:

- visits to Aboriginal communities from AFL role models and coordinators. Players and coordinators talk about football, career aspirations and social issues.
- the establishment and support of junior football competitions.

- coaching and umpiring clinics.
- donations of equipment such as footballs, jumpers, T-shirts and hats.
- clinics at Aboriginal cultural events.
- skills camps in Cairns, Broome, Alice Springs and Darwin.
- high-level skills testing and fitness programs at the NT Institute of Sport.
- football carnival.
- identifying outstanding players for inclusion in elite squads such as Territory Thunder.
- education scholarships at Kormilda College, Darwin, and assistance with relocation