



Coaching Indigenous players

Mark Williams is one of the AFL's greatest supporters of indigenous footballers, but not for the reason many think. In the fourth part of the *AFL Record's* coaching series, the Port Adelaide mentor explains why he is so excited about working with Aboriginal talent.

Many people assume I've had success with Aboriginal players because I'm Aboriginal myself. It's a common and long-held misconception.

Early in my first year at Collingwood, I received a letter from the indigenous group in Victoria inviting me to represent the Aboriginals in a game. I told them I couldn't play because I didn't qualify – I wasn't Aboriginal.

But that wasn't good enough for some people. In a game against Richmond not long after, I took a mark and was lining up for goal and Phil Egan was bagging me because I'd forgotten my heritage!

Recently, I found out there is Jamaican blood on my father's side, so that might explain some of my colouring.

Although the misconception about my heritage can be frustrating, it's also flattering where it relates to coaching indigenous players because it suggests I create an environment in which they can prosper. It has been the result of many years of learning, respecting and understanding.

Most of us wouldn't know an Aboriginal person if it wasn't for our associations with football, but I had the advantage of growing up with a lot of Aboriginal kids, and I enjoyed their company from a young age.

Then there were the football links. In the SANFL at Port Adelaide, I played with guys such as Gavin Wanganeen and Che Cockatoo-Collins, so when I went to Essendon as an assistant

coach, I already knew them. Then I got to know Michael Long, which was good to see how an older guy dealt with certain issues.

And then there was the coach, Kevin Sheedy, who made Aboriginal players feel very comfortable, and they played for him.

Back in my playing days, some clubs wouldn't have had an Aboriginal player on their list. Hawthorn was one, but it won last year's premiership with indigenous guys playing crucial roles. Every club has them now. People have become more tolerant, and wiser. At Port Adelaide, we target the best talent and we don't care what colour they are.

It's easy to be excited by Aboriginal players because many of them boast great skill, speed, agility, anticipation and an ability to do freakish things that most of us can only dream of.

I think that on the whole, Aboriginal kids probably practise their footy more than other kids, and they probably have higher quality practice too. In the past, other kids would have practised as much at school and in the park, but it doesn't happen as much these days. Aboriginal kids also tend to play little games with their larger, extended families, so their skills develop to a higher level at an earlier age.

That probably goes some way to explaining how Aboriginals make up less than three

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per cent of the Australian population, yet comprise 11 per cent of AFL players.

A coach should always encourage and nurture such natural flair rather than try to knock it out of them because all you'll end up with is a team of robots. Players hate that and so do the supporters. People love knowing somebody is capable of doing something absolutely brilliant at any second. You can't

be outrageously one way or the other, but you can't have a team of bland players if you want to be successful. And Aboriginal players are often capable of providing you with some spark and unpredictability that throws the opposition out.

But you can't just draft Aboriginal players and expect them to perform miracles overnight. A lot needs to happen before you reach that point.

I don't think it works as well if you have only one Aboriginal at your club. You need to ensure they have people – other Aboriginal players – to talk to on their level. They support, mentor and feed off each other, and that flows through what they do on and off the field. »

IN HARMONY: Working with indigenous players such as Danyle Pearce has been one of the highlights of Mark Williams' coaching career.





SUPPORT: Mark Williams says coaches get better results with indigenous players by showing them respect and care.



They also keep a keen eye on other promising indigenous players, whether it be a brother or a cousin or someone else in the 'brotherhood'. I have to confess that the Burgoynes (Peter and Shaun) told me about the Davey brothers (Aaron and Alwyn) and, to my eternal regret, I stupidly didn't act upon it.

A coach's success with Aboriginal players is directly proportional to the level of respect and care you give them. If they know you believe in them, you'll get much better results than you would if you hammered them.

The stereotypical image of Aboriginals is of quiet, shy guys who take time to feel at home, but gradually reveal their true, fun-loving characters as they gain confidence. But as one of my great Aboriginal friends Che Cockatoo-Collins would say, it's almost racist to say all Aboriginals are the same because they are not.

In fact, no player is the same as another, so we must treat every player differently – not because of the colour of their skin, but because of their needs. To work out their needs,

you need to delve into their backgrounds. The only way to gain a true understanding of the individual is to spend time in their environment with their extended families.

Contrary to popular belief, the Aboriginal race comprises many different tribes with different customs and belief systems, and they produce many different individuals. If you can reach them on their level, you might find out what makes them tick, and what it will take to get the best out of them as people and players.

When I spent time in the Tiwi Islands, I found out that brothers and sisters aren't allowed to look each other, or their elders, in the eyes at a certain age. People often judge Aboriginal guys if they don't look them in the eye; they think they're not listening. These are issues we need to understand.

You shouldn't necessarily put more effort into indigenous players than others, but you probably do. As a race, they haven't had the support they have needed and deserved, so if we give them more support than what others get, it just evens it up a little.

It might mean arranging a special dinner with the Aboriginal boys, or taking them to an art gallery – just a little novelty to get them together for some quality time and see how they're travelling. It's important to make them feel welcome and loved, and that they have someone to talk to if they need it.

In turn, people always want to talk to Aboriginal players. More so than any other group of footballers, they become role models. We see kids trying to kick and mark like Daniel Motlop, and run like Adam Goodes. Playing AFL football gives them an opportunity to show other young people what they need to do to excel. They help break down race barriers.

Now we need to break down another barrier. We only ever see Aboriginals playing, but there are so many other roles they can fill in the football world. I'm adamant we need Aboriginal coaches. Chris Johnson is in the system

KEYS TO COACHING

- 1 A coach's success with Aboriginal players is directly proportional to the respect and care you give them.
- 2 We must treat every player differently – not because of the colour of their skin, but their needs.
- 3 The only way to gain a true understanding of the individual is to spend time in their environment with their extended families.
- 4 Ensure Aboriginal players have people – other Aboriginal players – to talk to on their level.
- 5 Encourage natural flair rather than try to knock it out of them because all you'll end up with is a team of robots.
- 6 Listen when they suggest recruiting other promising indigenous players.

(as a development coach at the Brisbane Lions) and Jason Mifsud has been (an assistant at the Western Bulldogs and St Kilda, and now CEO of the AFL Foundation, and manager of the AFL's indigenous programs), but we need more.

As I say to the guys around me, "You're not going to get a (senior) job unless you're qualified. You have to do the hard yards first, just like everyone else."

And Aboriginals are just like everybody else. ☺

AS TOLD TO BEN COLLINS