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ESSAY

The Aboriginal football ethic

Where the rules get flexible

Tim Butcher and Barry Judd

IN HIS HIGHLY influential history of Australian rules football, Geoffrey Blainey promoted the idea that the sport constituted a 'game of our own'. In making this claim, Blainey suggested the sport was the outcome of Anglo-Australian cultural innovations. In raising the prospect of an Aboriginal football ethic we question this assertion and ask who is really taking this indigenous sport forward today.

Come on Haasts Bluff! One more goal. You still have a chance to win. Not much longer now. From the boundary line, we felt sure this clarion call through the public announcement system signalled that match officials were holding off calling an end to the game. Though played on Papunya's oval, with the home team, the Eagles, ahead and the ball in their hands, the local opposition from nearby Ikuntji (Haasts Bluff) was being given a chance to come back. Despite a berth in the next round, prize money and personal pride at stake, the Papunya elders who organised the event were less concerned about their team winning and more about ensuring each community got a fair go.

The sentiment expressed in this moment at the Papunya Sports Weekend held in September 2015 was repeated throughout the four-day event, and is mirrored at remote community sports weekends across central Australia. The meaning and value of Australian rules football to people with few other

activities in their lives that are regarded as having value in non-Aboriginal society is fundamental to their wellbeing. Families travel vast distances along treacherous roads to take part in these highly significant celebrations of sport, culture and country that embody their Aboriginality and sense of place in the world. Sports weekends are where family connections are sustained, and culture is infused into Australian football games played on country.

SINCE ITS INCEPTION in 1858, the laws of Australian rules football were promoted as a distinctly Australian invention – not an English import. Geoffrey Blainey shows in *A Game of Our Own* (Information Australia, 1990) that in the 1850s what were then known as the ‘Melbourne rules’ were listed on a single page, so they could be jotted down, quickly learned and easily used to settle disputes in play. An open letter to *Bells Life* written on 10 July 1858 by the ‘native-born’ Thomas Wentworth Wills, one of the game’s leading protagonists, offers a vision of Australian football as a game conceived for companionship and camaraderie, promoting general levels of fitness among young men and a sense of collective values that could be put to use in a time of war. Wills’ vision for Australian football was about much more than simply competition. He saw it as a winter pastime, outside of the summer cricket season that, along with horse racing, had come to dominate colonial sport in Victoria and New South Wales. As Barry Judd rediscovers in *On the Boundary Line* (Australian Scholarly Press, 2008), this ethic and the style of play that Wills promoted were unquestionably informed, not only by his English public schooling designed to make him a lawyer and a ‘gentleman’, but also his formative experiences on his squatter father’s lands in western Victoria where he witnessed and perhaps also participated in the game of Marngrook, a sport played by the Djab Wurrung and other Aboriginal peoples of the Kulin nation throughout the area now called Victoria. Other members of the game’s founding committee were not ‘native-born’, less open-minded and had only their colonial elite perspectives and experiences from their public school days in England of what sport is and how it should be played and organised.

Significantly, many of the important promoters of the Melbourne rules (later Victorian rules, before finally becoming known as Australian rules)

in Melbourne and Geelong were mostly young gentlemen arriving in the colony from elite English public schools and Oxbridge universities. With each of those English schools then playing their own brand of football, there were several interpretations of what would later become rugby union, rugby league, association football, and Australian and American football. From its first 'official' game on 7 August 1858 on a paddock outside the Melbourne Cricket Ground, Australian football and its lawmakers benefited from the lack of a unitary law of play during its formative years. It was a game open to interpretation and adaptation that became moulded by circumstance and opportunism. Liberal interpretations of the early Australian football laws and Wills' repeated assertions of his footballing ethic through his letters to *Bells Life* were what underpinned the free-flowing game we see today, with its running bounce and high mark. Its distinctly Australian political, social and economic setting of the time gave it a character that was not English in form or in tempo. This 'game of our own' gained rapid and widespread appeal. Australian football swiftly transitioned from a pastime of the colonial elite to a sport played and spectated by the colonial masses of the Victorian gold rush. It assumed the democratic spirit of the period and became a game that spoke to the ideal of equality. It quickly became a sport where personal wealth, class and educational status mattered little. It spread from Victoria to the colonies of Tasmania, South and Western Australia. Rugby, though, had gained a firm footing in New South Wales and later Queensland – a game with Victorian origins was seemingly too unpalatable to sample in the country north of the Riverina. Australian football was gaining a distinct identity as the game of the southern colonies.

In the decade of federation, then Prime Minister Alfred Deakin, the member for Ballarat and a proud Victorian, proclaimed on 28 August 1908 to the Australasian Football Council Jubilee Carnival that the Australian game of football embodied the Australian values and ideals of manhood he believed to be foundational to its nation-building project more perfectly than any imported sporting code. Australian football became more deeply entangled with notions of what it meant to be Australian throughout the twentieth century. Emergent national identity brought with it the political and legal frameworks that went much further than merely rejecting uniform notions

of a shared British race and the imposition of imperial policy on Australian affairs. John Chesterman and Brian Galligan in *Citizens Without Rights* (Cambridge University Press, 1997) and Tim Rowse in *White Flour, White Power: From Rations to Citizenship in Central Australia* (Cambridge University Press, 1998) unravel how policies designed for racial classification enacted a vision for a 'white Australia' constructed through both restrictions imposed on non-Anglo Australians and the attempted genocide of Aboriginal people and containment of Torres Strait Islander peoples. This stark climate of national identity politics thus played out on the Australian football field. Along with their sovereignty and human rights, Aboriginal peoples' participation in the national game was disavowed by Australian politics between 1901–67, and the consequent non-Aboriginal social attitudes that prevailed. Sean Gorman shows in *Legends: The AFL Indigenous Team of the Century* (Aboriginal Studies Press, 2011) the fact that these were extremely difficult times for Aboriginal players, but some – such as Doug Nicholls, Norm McDonald and Graham 'Polly' Farmer – nevertheless tolerated racial vilification on the field, in the change rooms and beyond the game to play out professional football careers.

Despite the 1967 referenda to remove the major racist clauses from the federal constitution that excluded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from the national polity, it took a further twenty-eight years to institute changes to the laws of Australian football necessary to outlaw the overt racism experienced by elite Aboriginal players, despite the new political enlightenment. The open and inclusive game Wills had envisaged in the spirit of the progressive democratic ideals of the Victorian gold rush was, like Wills himself, long forgotten. Australian football had become a space for parochial assertions of a national identity founded on a deep-seated xenophobia that regarded Aborigines as an internal security threat to racial purity every bit as problematic as the 'yellow peril' conceived to constitute the primary external security threat to white Australia. By the late 1960s such ideas began to appear out of step with the burgeoning political will for the multicultural reality that had always been present: a will to gain official recognition and embrace ideals that might function to reshape Australian national identity in ways inclusive and celebratory of Aboriginal peoples and Australians of non-Anglo origins.

PAPUNYA IN THE central Australian desert is one such place where the Aboriginal football ethic is clearly evident. Sports weekends here and in other Aboriginal communities throughout the region and across the Australian football-playing areas that span the continent are events that run on shoestring budgets and achieve far more than the mere playing of Australian football as defined by the laws of the sport. Sports weekends are far removed from the high-cost spectacle of the elite AFL competition streamed live via televisions, tablets and smartphones that give the sport its ubiquity throughout the winter months. Here there is not the mirage the media constructs of the elite-level competition sanitised by its current era of regimented professionalism and mass commercialisation. Here at Papunya, we find the game of Australian football played in a spirit not dissimilar to that avowed by Tom Wills a hundred and fifty-eight years ago.

Just how Australian football first came to central Australia, we are still researching. We have, however, found oral and written accounts of football being played in the region in the 1930s by Aboriginal men, and photographs of Aboriginal community teams at Ntaria (Hermannsburg) from the 1950s. In the postwar era, remote community people would have gained a growing appreciation of the prominence the game held in the cultural consciousness of whitefellas. The high cultural status it was accorded by white Australians meant that Anangu groups in central Australia quickly grasped and then mastered the mechanics of the game. Through encounters with government officials, missionaries and others, local people would have seen the sporting pages of newspapers that reached Alice Springs, and watched newsreels at movie theatres. For postwar generations a regional league was established in Alice Springs in 1947. Senior community men talk of playing for town-based teams in the league, and for regional representative teams that travelled interstate. Their decision to participate then, as now, was based on the money that town-based teams would pay players, and the prestige and social acceptance that Australian football brought Aboriginal men in an era when they could not legally reside in Alice Springs.

However, what those men and their families speak most passionately about is their participation in games played between Anangu communities. Having heard through the bush telegraph that a community was organising

a weekend of matches, they would pile a team of family and friends together into a truck and drive out in the hope of getting a game. This ethic is what we see embodied at Papunya Sports Weekends today – a distinctly Aboriginal football ethic that embodies Anangu values and qualities that include those of mobility, immediacy and intimacy that Yasmine Musharbash illustrates in *Yuendumu Everyday* (Aboriginal Studies Press, 2009).

The Papunya Eagles and Ikuntji (Haasts Bluff) Swans are located just fifty kilometres apart, and maintain close ties of kinship, culture and history. In the late 1950s many contemporary Papunya families were forcibly relocated from Ikuntji (Haasts Bluff) because the government said no good water could be found at the Bluff settlement. Given these entangled histories it is no wonder that one team might want to give the other a chance. Yet such generosity extends much further. Some teams that attended the 2015 Sports Weekend at Papunya had travelled far greater distances, but their connections are no less strong. On the second day of competition, a team of young men arrived unexpectedly from Wirrimanu (Balgo) in Western Australia in a handful of cars not designed for the 1,680 kilometre round trip on unsealed outback roads. They came without family, few provisions and little money in their pockets. Local community elders together decided they needed to look after them. They made sure the young men not only got a game, but a heartfelt welcome, a good feed and somewhere to sleep.

The carnival of Australian football that is the centrepiece of the Papunya Sports Weekend is played over four days. The vibrancy, colours and sounds of on-country football at Papunya are indicative of a distinctive Anangu approach to the Australian game that is reflective of central Australian Aboriginal culture and their associated cultural practices. In stark contrast to the playing and spectating of Australian football in the AFL and its regional subsidiary the Central Australian Football League, Anangu organise, play and watch football in ways that exist outside and sometimes contrary to current non-Aboriginal expectations of what the sport is and should be, and, in our view, in ways that are more akin to Tom Wills' original vision for the sport.

In contrast to a set of fixtures planned months or even years ahead that is the basis of all AFL-sanctioned football competition, on-country football is

underpinned by the Anangu concepts of mobility, immediacy and intimacy. Important decisions about match scheduling often occur 'just in time' as the number of community teams wishing to participate in a sports weekend becomes known. The flexible nature of match scheduling reflects the reality of Anangu life and the significant challenges of time, distance and cost that Aboriginal Australian football teams face in central Australia, where life often depends on short-term needs being met immediately. Travelling vast distances to play the game over some of the harshest roads on the planet, breakdowns and delays make playing Australian football characteristically a hit-and-miss affair. The approach to scheduling matches therefore allows a high degree of adaptation, whereby the overall fixture can be renegotiated and modified to accommodate the situation at hand. The benefit of such an approach was made clearly apparent to us when the team from Balgo arrived. The elders who organised the sports weekend quickly convened a meeting and all agreed on a reworked set of fixtures to accommodate this team from far-off Western Australia.

As Brian McCoy argues in *Holding Men* (Aboriginal Studies Press, 2008), and is evident in Liam Campbell's film *Aboriginal Rules* (Warlpiri Media Association Inc., 2007), the Anangu teams of central (and northern) Australia play Australian football in a way that diverges from the non-Aboriginal way that is prevalent in highly structured and regulated AFL administered league competitions. While non-Aboriginal competitive football stresses team structure, defensive mechanisms and a mindset that values winning above all else, on-country football played by Anangu stresses attack in a style that is characterised by high-speed running, quick scoring and minimal body contact. Style determined by the perceived attractiveness in the way teams and individual players choose to give expression to the game is given priority over any desire to win. Tackling is largely absent, in keeping with the cultural customs of desert Aboriginal peoples that stress a preference for minimal body contact between individuals. In a very compelling sense the Aboriginal football ethic that has emerged as a dynamic force in central Australia is a direct outcome of kin relationships underpinned by Aboriginal concepts of intimacy and regulated by a complex set of social rules and prohibitions that stretch an invisible web across vast geographical areas of

the Australian continent. These invisible ties that bind Anangu far across central Australia underpin a playing style and approach to the Australian game of football that signifies a cultural difference characterised by its exciting nature.

Such cultural differences extend beyond the field of play to the mechanisms that determine who wins and who loses. The huge expanse of graded red earth that is the Papunya football ground possesses no scoreboard; final scores, and therefore winning teams, are rather negotiated by elders in and around the commentary box through a reflexive process that takes in the competing teams' situation in the moment relative to the overall competition, together with ongoing feedback from the boisterous crowd. Boundary umpires are not employed and play often spills beyond the playing surface. Although central umpires are utilised, their ability (and possibly desire) to strictly adjudicate the laws of the game is also highly flexible and linked to the relationship each has to the teams competing under their supervision. This same characteristic is also true of the goal umpires, whose tally of goals and points scored is subtly shaped by the relationships that exist between themselves and those participating on and off the field of play. More than once we found ourselves joining in a euphoric cheer for a goal before the umpire called it – who no doubt also saw the ball sail waywardly outside the goalpost.

BEYOND THE INFLUENCE of relationships that regulate interactions between people is the overarching importance that country exerts on the Aboriginal football ethic. Playing on-country reinforces longstanding relationships and determines a discreet hierarchy of relations between competing teams. Competing on their home country during their own sports weekend we saw the Papunya Eagles were given their due respect by visiting teams. In very subtle ways the Eagles were also given every opportunity to progress through to the finals stage of the competition and to claim both victory and, perhaps more importantly, the right to brag that they remained unbeatable on their own country.

We have been shown that the Anangu concept of country and the spaces in which Australian football matches are played can be highly influential in

determining the outcomes of matches – place being the paramount consideration. We watched the Eagles play several matches over the weekend, more than other teams, sometimes back-to-back. At past sports weekends at Papunya, additional quarters have been added to finals in order to achieve a desirable result. If this cannot always be achieved it may be mandated that a visiting team that wins does not automatically have the right to brag of their triumph. In cultures where respecting the space of country and one's place within it are held to be profoundly important, such matters take precedence over the largely insignificant facts of who outscores who.

The struggles of previous generations of Aboriginal footballers, symbolised so poignantly by Nicky Winmar and the achievement of Michael Long in instigating the AFL's introduction of Rule 30 to prohibit racial and religious vilification, created a level playing field for current and future Aboriginal players. They not only made space for Adam Goodes' recent assertion of his place as an Aboriginal person in the national game, they also gave power to the Aboriginal football ethic we experience at Papunya. While Tom Wills' original vision for Australian football as an open and adaptive game has been lost at the elite level to commercialism, professionalism and the politics of a bygone age, it is seemingly alive and well in Anangu interpretations of the game. The liberal interpretations of Australian football laws at sports weekends keep family and friends enthralled. This Aboriginal football ethic stands in stark contrast to increasing complaints by followers of the AFL version that it has become rigid and sanitised by inhibitive laws designed to enhance the interactive televisual experience. At Papunya we participate in a far more social experience.

Adam Goodes sent a strong signal to the sporting nation of Australia that Aboriginal culture is alive and well in its game. In performing his war dance he gestured towards very real ways for cultural difference to be enacted on the field of play, to disentangle identity politics from the game, and to become accepted and celebrated as integral to its future. He is not alone in asserting Aboriginal difference in the national game. The Aboriginal football ethic is a contemporary practice of many. It is an evolution of Australian football – an adaption that inspires cultural interpretation and creativity. It is not so much a rediscovery of Tom Wills' ethic of companionship and

camaraderie, but an embodiment of the spirit of the game avowed by its lead protagonist. At a time when Australian football could do with an injection of creativity and innovation, the Aboriginal football ethic is breathing fresh life into the game.

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