



## **Good Sport Bad Sport**

Peter Mongta

Interviewed by Monique Grbec

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After three months of COVID-19 isolation, restrictions eased and the Australian Football League returned to stadiums with cardboard cut-outs for a crowd. Record numbers of footy fans tuned into the television and watched a pre-siren ceremony where all of the players and umpires folded into the knight kneel of Colin Kaepernick's 2016 protest of the United States of America's treatment of minorities. This AFL approved, club-endorsed commitment to protest systemic racism in Australian sport was player led and included all 18 clubs. Like their National Rugby League peers, kneeling was a sign of support, unity and respect to Indigenous team mates and the global Black Lives Matter movement.

Team solidarity was warmed by the type of respectful silence we hear on ANZAC Day at 11:00 a.m. It was in stark contrast to the vitriolic roaring boos that blanketed every game played by Australian of the Year and two times Brownlow medallist winner, Adam Goodes, after he dared to publicly challenge racism in the AFL. His visionary celebration of skilfully kicking a goal re-enacted the ceremonial dance created by Mark Yettica-Paulson with the 15-year-old Flying Boomerangs squad; the first traditional dance taught to Goodes. His strong body and powerful and fearless moves projected the united pride of millennia.

Instead of the whole crowd embracing the haka-style war cry, which has proven so popular during NRL's Indigenous All Stars matches, white supremacists got loud and aggressive. Instead of using the opportunity to pay respect to Marngrook as this country's first football game and the driving force behind Australian Rules Football's uniqueness on the world stage, mainstream sport commentary reverted to colonist strategies of divide and conquer. Mongta, who has worked with Yettica-Paulson over the years, is disappointed at "the lack of understanding ... The dance is a sign of shared respect between two tribes."

"The strain of conversations and constantly justifying your experiences, how you feel and what you do, is hard to bear", says Mongta. "Then there's social media. It's a dangerous place for Indigenous people ... Not just divide and conquer ..." His voice whispers as he mentions two suicides in eastern



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Victoria during the COVID-19 isolation. From the cocoon of isolation, it's hard to know what's really going on.

What we learned from two 2019 documentaries (*The Last Quarter* and *The Australian Dream*) is the rampant abuse suffered by Indigenous players. And we learned from legends Nicky Winmar, Michael Long and Adam Goodes, that being silent and ignoring the effects of racism is part of the ongoing systemic problem.

After the AFL resumed competitive play for just one week, and five years since Adam Goodes' retirement, vitriolic trolls have returned to social media, spitting up their white supremacist bile. Mongta mourns the possibility that Carlton's Eddie Betts is experiencing the same vilification as Goodes. From all of the evidence so far, the troll is an Essendon supporter. While we wait to see if the club will hold him accountable, we can enjoy the justice and respect wielded by the Saint Kilda and Fremantle Dockers Football Clubs who swiftly and publicly cancelled the memberships of members whose values do not align with the club's and the AFL's. Not only do these clubs gain the respect of their players, many members of the broader football community also offered to compensate the clubs for lost income.

With over 70 educated and empowered Indigenous players in the AFL, and the continued public support by the league and other great Indigenous athletes like Nova Peris OAM, the call for dignity and equality in sport is louder than it has ever been.

In his role as Indigenous Sports Development Officer at Sports and Recreation Victoria, Mongta anticipates small steps of positive change will result from a cultural education program being developed by PricewaterhouseCoopers in partnership with Basketball Victoria. The program is aimed at increasing awareness of unconscious, socialised racism and bias, and Mongta views the program as an opportunity to increase understanding and evidence that will help to improve sporting, coaching and officiating environments for all Australians.

Closer to home, in his role as assistant coach for Gippsland Power Under 18s, the COVID-19 restrictions meant that every player received personal development plans, and the coaches were left "coasting in a no-man's land waiting for Department of Human Services to reveal the latest regulations and rules." Mongta can only speculate when the season will reopen, if it will reopen at all this season.



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