

Submission to the  
**House Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs**  
**Inquiry into the contribution of sport to Indigenous wellbeing and mentoring**

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I am pleased to have the opportunity to make a brief submission to this important inquiry. My submission is based not so much on my academic interest, but more importantly, on my decade long involvement with the remote Warlpiri community of Yuendumu, in the Northern Territory. This led to my family welcoming Liam Jurrah to live with us in Melbourne as he embarked on his remarkable journey as the first ever fully initiated Aboriginal from a remote community to become an AFL footballer. Since he became an AFL player in 2009 there have been several other Indigenous players from remote and traditional communities follow his footsteps and join the ranks as players of other AFL clubs.

The Collingwood Industrial Magpies (CiM), of which I am Vice President, is a unique organisation (comprising Collingwood supporters within the industrial relations profession) committed to engaging with Indigenous communities through a common love of sport, and Australian Rules football in particular, has maintained a support link with the community of Yuendumu, by assisting their football club, the Yuendumu Magpies. Over the years since the CiM's formation in 2003 we have sponsored numerous visits by young Warlpiri men to Melbourne, providing them a unique opportunity to attend football games at the famous MCG as well as visit the Collingwood Football Club to meet coaches and players. The purpose of such visits has been to develop personal friendships with people from this remote community, such that these young men can gain

confidence in their own potential and perhaps broaden their horizons by helping to break down any fear of life in the 'big smoke' or in the 'white fella' world.

One of these youngsters was Liam Jurrah, who, after staying with my family and visiting Melbourne for the first time, returned home to Yuendumu with a determination to become an AFL player. Tragically, as you are probably aware, Liam got arrested by police earlier this year and is now awaiting trial on serious charges resulting from a violent episode, which took place in one of the dysfunctional town camps on the edge of Alice Springs. It has temporarily interrupted his football career, but I am confident that at his trial in March, he will be found not guilty. He will always have my support and that of my family.

Another of these young men is Bruno Wilson, who has recently commenced studying for a law degree. We are currently assisting Bruno on his own incredible journey, for if, against all odds, he is able to successfully complete his studies, he will be the first person from a truly remote Aboriginal community to do so.

I mention these 2 individual examples simply to highlight how the joint love of football has enabled a group of (mostly) white Anglo-Celtic professionals from inner city Melbourne to develop a truly deep and heartfelt bond with a whole community of Aboriginal people deep in the Tanami desert, and how this relationship has played an important part in opening up new pathways for young men from this resilient Warlpiri community. This relationship, based primarily on people to people connections, has a rock solid foundation, and has grown in importance and depth over the course of the past 9 years.

Within the Yuendumu community we have found a wonderful partner in our mission, the Warlpiri Youth Development Aboriginal Corporation (WYDAC), whose on-going support and capacity-building activities amongst Warlpiri youth, is truly remarkable and inspirational.

Since 2007 I have made numerous visits to Yuendumu and other remote communities where the evidence of stark disadvantage, poverty, poor health, violence, crime, substance abuse and illiteracy is all too plain to see. However, most, if not all, of these disturbing factors, from my personal observations and experiences, are the outcomes primarily of listlessness. More than any other factor, a life of sitting around *doing nothing*, is a life lost. It results in boredom, depression, mental illness, violence, crime, substance abuse and tragically even suicide.

This is not a traditional lifestyle, but rather, a result of the sudden destruction of traditional ways of life and their replacement, first by missions and ration stations, and later by social welfare systems, which have led, as has been well documented, to a culture of complete and utter dependency. This outcome is nothing short of a national disgrace and arguably, needs to be recognised for what it is, a crime against humanity. Governments of all political persuasions, be they State, Territory or Federal, have failed these communities. We, as a society, have failed these communities, and in doing so we have failed as a nation. We have failed ourselves.

However, the purpose of my brief submission is not to be side-tracked by engaging in a blame game. That will not assist Aboriginal people. Nevertheless, by recognising that listlessness is the root cause of most dysfunction in remote Indigenous communities, overcoming this should be the motivator for all government policies and programs in this area, be they concerned with education, employment, health, crime, women and children's rights etc.

If this is accepted, then it is terribly frustrating that so few resources seem to be devoted to promoting sport in remote communities, despite sport being one of the few activities which people in these communities consistently show a readiness to engage. It is an activity they have long demonstrated they have an emotional and passionate engagement with. In the communities of Central Australia, with which I am most familiar, football is the one activity and discussion topic, over which people can be relied upon to get excited and

energised. Surely, if we want to assist these communities get active, to become dynamic centres of activity, then the first – not the last – priority should be to help these communities build on the activities they are already engaged and interested in, namely sport.

Football in Central Australia (the region I am most familiar with), is not only an activity enjoyed by people in remote communities, whether playing or supporting their teams, but for young men from traditional communities, it offers a safe and healthy avenue for expressing their manhood. In Yuendumu for instance, I have often heard young men say that playing for the Yuendumu Magpies is a way of expressing themselves as Warlpiri warriors. It is clearly a vehicle for developing confidence, as well as a form of expression and social cohesion, just as for many people from this region, has been the impact of the desert art movement. Football energises whole communities not just males, as anyone who has attended a remote community sport weekend can attest to. But women's sport as well, be it basketball, softball or more recently, the emerging phenomenon of women's football, is also widely played in remote communities.

In addition to all this, football in particular, is one of the few mechanisms by which young indigenous men can engage with the white fella world from a position of strength. Football offers a way to connect with wider society. Importantly, because so many young Indigenous men are good footballers, playing the game provides a vehicle for them to engage with 'mainstream' society with confidence.

Sadly, however, a lack of proper resources, training facilities, coaches, umpires, administrators or even regular and sustainable competitions, has meant that, despite its potential, sporting clubs in remote communities are fragile. Their positive impact wanes and waxes with the ebb and flow of community life, rather than being structured in a way to strengthen and reinforce social cohesion in these communities.

Too often, government and private funding of sport, understandably, given the population densities, tends to be directed at town centres like Alice Springs or Darwin. Few resources or attention seem to reach out to the people in remote communities.

To date, disappointingly, no-one has bothered to try to leverage off these communities' love of football, any broader capacity building and community development. Football clubs in remote Indigenous communities require not only players, but coaches, physios, trainers, administrators, bus drivers, cooks, time keepers, umpires etc. There is clearly the potential to activate and engage large numbers of people in these communities, far beyond those playing the sport. To equip these communities with the necessary social capital to deliver in these areas obviously requires training and resourcing. But if properly established and resourced, sporting clubs and football in particular, could provide a vehicle for wider capacity building and community development. Developed, structured and run by the communities themselves, such sporting clubs could form the foundation for emerging Indigenous entrepreneurship and transformative forms of self-governance.

Toward this end I am leading a team of researchers from Deakin University presently preparing an Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Grant application to be submitted early next year. The purpose of our research project, should it receive funding, is to examine the role of football in numerous remote communities of Central Australia, in four stages:

**Stage One:** History of football in these communities – what it has meant to them.

**Stage Two:** The current state of football in these communities – participation rates, levels of competition, state of facilities, coaches, funding, transport etc.

**Stage Three:** The potential for broader capacity building and community development etc leveraging off football

**Stage Four:** Policy prescriptions - i.e. how to overcome the obstacles to such broader capacity building etc

Ultimately I am hoping this research, should it receive ARC support, can provide the knowledge and data from within these communities themselves, to assist in framing the most appropriate government and NGO means of supporting sport in remote Indigenous communities, as a major vehicle for broader capacity building and community development. This, perhaps more than is thought by current policy makers, could make a qualitative and quantitative contribution to *Closing the Gap*.

In closing, I wish this committee well in its deliberations, and hope that it leads to positive outcomes for Indigenous people. I am happy to appear in person or by video link should the committee wish to discuss my experiences and opinions further.

25 October 2012

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