UP FRONT AND BEYOND THE CENTRE LINE
Australian Aborigines in Elite Australian Rules Football

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Abstract   Although there has been a substantial growth in the number of Aboriginal players in the Australian Football League over the past decade, issues of structural and institutional racism have not been explored. This investigation of the assignment of players by position revealed marked patterns of difference, which tend to reflect stereotypes about Aboriginal athletes. The results are similar to research conducted in the USA and the UK but suggest even stronger patterns of differentiation.

Key words • Aborigines • Australia • football • racism • segregation • stereotypes

Since expanding from its regional beginnings as the Victorian Football League (VFL) to a national competition in 1990, the Australian Football League (AFL) has become the most popular spectator team sport in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1997). The AFL is widely believed to be a model for the integration of all population groups in an elite sports league. For example, the film *Marn Grook: An Aboriginal Perspective of Australian Rules Football* refers to the sport as 'a place where all men are on an equal footing', and where 'for 100 minutes, everyone but for the colour of their jumper is equal — players and spectators alike' (Mulcahy and McGregor, 1996).

Aborigines[1] in the AFL: From Exclusion to Active Recruitment

> Aborigines play sport in a white world: white games, venues, rules, directors, officials, and selectors. Always players or performers, they are never partners in the sports enterprise. (Tatz, 1987: 122)

In the past decade, there has been a notable increase in the number of Aboriginal players in the AFL. In the late 1990s, Aborigines represent approximately 6 percent of AFL players, a considerable overrepresentation considering they make

up less than 2 percent of the Australian population. This rapid increase can be attributed, in part, to the addition of new clubs. For example, 13 of the 43 Aboriginal players listed for the 1998 season were with two of those expansion teams — Fremantle and West Coast. Additionally, there was recognition of Aboriginal talent (Smith, 1993; Tatz, 1995), and more systematic scouting and recruiting to include remote areas of the country, particularly the Northern Territory — 'a major nursery of black talent' (Tatz, 1995: 168). In the first 60 years of Aboriginal involvement — between 1904 and 1964 — only 14 known Aborigines competed in the VFL. The low numbers have been attributed to racist processes of exclusion that have denied talented Aboriginal players the opportunity to play at the elite level (Blake, 1998; Gardiner, 1997; Tatz, 1995, 1998). Since the establishment of a national competition in 1990, more than 60 other Aborigines have joined the ranks of elite football players; the 43 Aboriginal players who competed for AFL teams in 1998 formed the largest number to take the field in a single season. This overrepresentation is especially noteworthy, given that Aborigines are virtually absent at the elite level of many mainstream sports for both men and women (e.g. cricket, netball, soccer, rugby union, field hockey, golf, swimming and tennis). Aborigines are overrepresented in only the two (mainly working class) sports of rugby league and boxing. As a signifier of progress in access and opportunity, AFL overrepresentation may be illusory in at least two ways. First, it tends to dissuade an examination of actual opportunity structures. That is, the large number of Aboriginal players gives the impression that successful integration has been achieved. Second, it may actually exacerbate racist ideas about sports performance. That is, the commonsense reasoning for the abundant listing of Aboriginal representation in peripheral, speed positions is because they are 'naturally' suited for these roles.

Racism in Sport

> We've got to . . . stay worried about economic growth and not worry about saying sorry to a forgotten race. (John Elliot, president of the AFL's Carlton Football Club; cited in Heinrichs, 1999)

The experience of Aborigines in sport cannot be divorced from Aboriginal experience in Australia more generally. Stark differences in the living conditions and life chances of Aborigines and other Australians are widely acknowledged. For example, Aborigines have particularly low life expectancy rates and family incomes and inordinately high rates of adult mortality, incarceration, deaths in custody and unemployment (Broome, 1994). Researchers have suggested that European settlement has been an 'almost unrelieved tragedy' under which Aborigines continue to face 'entrenched prejudice' (Burnley and Routh, 1985: 199). In sport, Aborigines' experiences have been marked by exclusion, discrimination and 'gross inequality of chances, choices, and facilities' (Tatz, 1995: 297). The argument that Aboriginal athletes have always had to contend 'with a racist society that places a negative value on all things black' (Tatz, 1987: 125) is borne out in public attitudes: an AFL club president recently stated that the

public would admire and respect Aboriginal players 'as long as they conduct themselves like white people . . . off the field' (Mulcahy and McGregor, 1996).

Racism in the AFL: The Racial and Religious Vilification Code

> The AFL Commission remains committed to doing all it can to eradicate on-field racial abuse and getting a message to the wider community, including the six to seven million spectators who attend AFL matches. The AFL's position is clear: any form of racial abuse is not acceptable. (Australian Football League, 1997)

Within Australia, the AFL is credited with leading the fight against racism in major professional sports. In 1995, in the wake of a series of well-publicized incidents of racial taunting of Aboriginal players by opponents and spectators, the AFL instituted a code of conduct governing such incidents. The original impetus for the code emerged two years earlier when Aboriginal player Nicky Winmar raised his shirt in front of spectators who had taunted him throughout the game and pointed to his black skin — a gesture which triggered national debate on racism and the role of Aborigines in sport (Cashman, 1995; McNamara, 1998; Tatz, 1995). By the end of 1997, 10 complaints had been heard under Rule 30, the Racial and Religious Vilification Code, but no players were found guilty. Most cases have been dealt with through mediation rather than going to the full AFL Tribunal, a process about which some Aboriginal players have expressed reservations (Winkler, 1998). Changes to the code in 1997 included requiring all clubs to adopt a uniform education programme on racism, allowing players charged under Rule 30 to have legal representation at tribunal hearings and providing penalties for players or club officials who breach confidentiality provisions.

While the AFL has publicly tackled the issue of racial taunting (or 'sledging' as it is known in Australia) on the field, there has been little discussion of structural inequalities that may affect Aborigines' experiences both during and after their playing careers. The extensive debates in the USA (Coakley, 1997; Eitzen and Sage, 1997) have yet to surface in the Australian context. Instead, both the public and the AFL have defined racism narrowly and focused almost exclusively on verbal abuse of players.

There is evidence to suggest that racial taunting has a history as long as the sport itself (Cashman, 1995; Stoddart, 1986). Rather than complaining, early players put up with taunting because 'they did not want to make a fuss' or because no structure existed within which to make a complaint (Rioli, in *The Sports Factor*, 1997). Since taunting is the result of racial stereotypes, it is important to identify the typical representations that have developed in relation to Aboriginal athletes.

Stereotypes of Aborigines in the AFL

Baker and Boyd (1997) argue that sports — and the discourses that surround them — have become one of the metanarratives of 20th-century culture. As a result, the stereotypes that mediated sports produce become significant because many people come to see them as accurate and informative. Further, in the sports context, coaches may use stereotypes to make decisions that impact on opportunities for athletes:

> If a coach believes that the black sportsman he is helping to prepare is naturally endowed with the physical equipment to produce fast sprints . . . it will affect his judgment as to the areas of specialty into which he should channel the efforts of that sportsman. (Cashmore, 1982: 44)

Studies of the Australian sports media suggest that Aboriginal athletes in general are seen as possessing different skills and qualities from those of non-Aboriginal athletes (Cashman, 1995; Coram, 1994; Lattas, 1996; Stoddart, 1986). In addition, they are singled out for both 'success' stories and controversy (Coram, 1994). Comments attributed to AFL coaches and leading AFL commentators provide insights into stereotypes about playing styles of Aborigines. Aboriginal players are described as being mesmeric, scintillating, instinctive, naturally talented, magical, inventive, and having breathtaking flair, exquisite touch and a different sense of time and space (Andrews, 1998; Atkinson and Poulter, 1993; Eva, 1998; Hinds, 1996; Linnell, 1997; Ray, 1998; Sheahan, 1999; Tatz, 1995, 1998). Perhaps Ramsey (1998: 87) best summarizes widespread cultural beliefs about Aboriginal AFL players:

> There remains a school of thought that Aboriginal footballers are not the same as other players, that they possess a kind of 'sixth sense' that allows them a greater awareness of what's happening around them, an ability to size up pressure situations more quickly than their fair-skinned opponents and that they have an added athleticism that makes the most difficult physical tasks seem easier.

Aboriginal athletes have also been seen as unreliable, lacking discipline, unable to handle success and unsuitable for positions of responsibility (Cashman, 1995; Stoddart, 1986).

The only other team sport in Australia in which Aboriginal men are overrepresented is rugby league, the predominant winter football code on the eastern seaboard. Research on Australian rugby league suggests that Aboriginal players are overrepresented in positions defined by coaches as requiring speed and quickness, but generally absent from positions defined as requiring leadership and intellectual abilities (Hallinan, 1991). These stereotypes are consistent with research in England and the USA showing that black and white players are seen as having different abilities, skills and personality traits. In England, 'blacks are perceived to be quick, instinctive, physically strong but lacking in intelligence and courage' (Malcolm, 1997: 266). In North America, black athletes are more often described as 'natural athletes', while whites tend to be framed as thinkers or hard workers (Davis and Harris, 1998; Dyson, 1993; Murrell and Curtis, 1994; Rainville and McCormick, 1977; Wonsek, 1992).

Racism in Australian Sport

Despite the multicultural nature of Australian society and the overrepresentation of Aboriginal Australians in certain sports, with some exceptions . . . there has been a lack of sociologically informed research on ethnicity and Aboriginality in sport . . . (Rowe et al., 1997: 354)

Given the popularity of sport in Australia, it is surprising how little published academic critical analysis has emerged in relation to racism and sport. In the context of an abiding popular interest in football and an ongoing public debate over racism in the AFL, attempts to study racial dynamics in the sport seem vital. However, even while the AFL has publicly addressed the issue of racial taunting during games, there has been little discussion of structural inequalities that might impact on Aborigines' experiences both during and after their playing careers. Instead, both the public and the AFL have defined racism narrowly and focused almost exclusively on verbal abuse of players.

This narrow focus on overt behaviour grows out of a widely accepted cultural definition of racism as an overtly intentional practice (Cowlishaw, 1986: 5) that is revealed in behaviour such as racial taunting by players and spectators. However, defining racism as such — and researching only intentional behaviour — is severely limiting. By focusing on institutionalized or structural racism, the focus turns to consequences rather than intentions (Brown, 1986; Cowlishaw, 1986; Morris and Cowlishaw, 1997). Structural racism tends to be concealed and subtle, rather than overt and obvious, and is often based upon unintentional rather than intentional behaviour.

The recent increase in number of Aboriginal players in the AFL could indicate that racist barriers are eroding. Indeed, some observers have optimistically suggested that the achievements of Aboriginal players have 'begun the process of breaking down the ignorance which manifests itself in racism' (Stewart et al., 1997: 198). However, this increased visibility may be deceptive. For example, in South Africa, numerical minorities can still be social and economic majorities. Thus, racial participation numbers alone tell us little about racial dynamics or structural racism in sport (Booth, 1998; Boyd, 1997; Chappell et al., 1996; Maguire, 1988; Malcolm, 1997).

As part of broader research into Aboriginal involvement in AFL, this study focused on the playing positions of Aborigines now participating in the league. Our interest was in whether or not a pattern of field assignment existed that was in accord with the vast majority of international research findings on positional assignment and associated responsibilities. In brief, studies of positional segregation in team sports have been regularly conducted in North America for almost three decades (Coakley, 1997; Eitzen and Sage, 1997). The earliest recorded studies outside North America examined men's soccer in England (Maguire, 1988; Melnick, 1988). There also have been recent studies of cricket and basketball in England (Chappell et al., 1996; Malcolm, 1997) and netball and rugby union in New Zealand (Melnick, 1996; Melnick and Thomson, 1996). In Australia, the research has focused on basketball and rugby league (Hallinan, 1991; Hallinan et al., 1991). In most cases, these studies have found consistent patterns of over- and underrepresentation in playing positions on the basis of

racial backgrounds, as well as the existence of stereotypes about the 'suitability' of black and white athletes for various positions.

Methodology

Critics of positional assignment studies in sport have focused on their sheer volume, descriptive nature and methodological weaknesses (Birrell, 1989; Leonard and Phillips, 1997; Margolis and Allyn Piliavin, 1999; Melnick, 1996; Melnick and Thomson, 1996). Thus, we acknowledge that there are difficulties both in quantitatively measuring complex social processes and in applying research techniques used in overseas studies to the Australian context. Further, we recognize that playing positions in the AFL are the outcome of multiple structural, individual, psychological, social and historical events. Mindful of Melnick's description of the field as a 'swollen corpus', we also believe it would be ironic if researchers were dissuaded from studies of this form of inequality because authors of previous studies have concluded that the numerical count had reached its zenith. In countries like Australia, where little research has been completed, studies like this are particularly needed for questioning beliefs about the alleged improvement of opportunities for Aboriginal athletes.

Unlike studies which have been critiqued for overrelying on photographs and visual identification in order to determine race category (Malcolm, 1997), we recorded information only for those players recorded as Aborigines on the AFL official register of 'League Players of Known Aboriginal Descent Who Have Played AFL/VFL'. This register records every player since the beginning of elite Australian Rules competition in 1897 who self-identified as Aborigines. In Australia, defining Aboriginality is a complex issue in which self-definition plays a key role, as does acceptance by the indigenous community in which the person lives. Thus, we have excluded players who do not claim Aboriginality and, like the government and Aboriginal communities, have considered physical appearance as irrelevant. The data for the study were drawn from several sources. The first was a catalogue of Aboriginal players from the AFL Head Office that indicated a total of 43 listed players for the 1998 season. Position assignments were obtained from official weekly lists published in *The Age* and the *Herald-Sun* newspapers, and from a compressed grid used by *The Age* to track player performance.

Rather than relying on the positions that were assigned at the start of the season, we recorded the listed position for every Aboriginal player in each of the 22 rounds of the regular season. This approach takes into consideration the culture of Australian Rules whereby any player can occupy any given position. In comparison to the major North American team sports, AFL field positions are very fluid: there is no offside rule, players may move anywhere on the field and any player is entitled within the rules to score a goal. Furthermore, several varieties of positional grids are used to designate players. To overcome these challenges, we respected the integrity of each position as assigned within the AFL system by recording the position to which each Aborigine was assigned for each round. It should be noted that the culture of pre-match assignment is sometimes

a ruse or game in itself played out by coaches and match committees to outwit each other (Connolly, 1998). However, we concluded that there was no reason to believe that the reliability of the pre-match assignments unduly affected any group of players.

Although many North American studies have focused on the issue of centrality, we agree with British researchers who have argued that the concept of centrality is difficult to define in some sports where fluidity of positions and of players between positions is the rule rather than the exception. Maguire (1988) argues that centrality has been defined as taking into account the spatial location of positions, the types of tasks performed by players in those positions, the rate and range of interaction between players and/or players and management and the qualities associated with specific positions. While acknowledging that the fluidity of AFL play complicates the process of defining positions around the concept of centrality, we relied upon a combination of two factors. First, we considered the attributes and skills believed to be required for playing different positions. We relied upon descriptions of the attributes and skills as compiled by several popular commentators (Mains, 1982; Pascoe, 1995; Warren, 1982; see also Hallinan, 1991). We also considered the official listing of players, relying upon diagrammatic grids of starting positions produced by the AFL. As a result, we were able to classify positions as central, non-central and non-starting. However, a fourth category did not fit into the classifications. This is the category known as followers (ruck, ruck rover and rover). The AFL does not distinguish the three followers in the official team listings and each of the three positions has unique attributes.

Findings

> Lester-Smith [West Coast Eagles team manager] said Wirrpunda [Aboriginal starter] would never dominate games of football like a key position player. (Baum, 1999)

Playing Time

Overall, Aborigines represented 6.4 percent of the total number of listed players in the AFL in 1998. Despite 43 Aborigines being officially listed as players, many appeared infrequently during the 22 rounds of the regular season. If every player took the field for every round, the total number of appearances by Aboriginal athletes would have been 946. However, over the season, the appearance rate for Aborigines was much lower: just under 55 percent (519 appearances). Indeed, the greatest number of Aborigines to take the field in one week was 29. Three of the 43 players were not selected for the entire season and three were named only on the interchange (substitution) or emergency bench. The largest group of Aboriginal athletes (15) played between 11 and 19 games, closely followed by a group of 13 Aboriginal players who gained only inter-mittent selection of between one and 10 games. Finally, nine athletes gained selection on 20 or more occasions.

Table 1   Distribution of Assignment to Central/Keystone Positions Between Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Players

	Total N of appearances possible	N of Aborigine appearances	Aborigines as % of all appearances	N of Non-Aborigine appearances	Non-Aborigines as % of all appearances
Central Positions					
*Full Back (1)	352	0	0	352	100
*Centre Half Back (1)	352	0	0	352	100
*Centre Half Forward (1)	352	0	0	352	100
Followers (3)	1056	14	1.3	1042	98.6
Full Forward (1)	352	5	1.4	347	98.6
Centre (1)	352	19	5.4	333	94.6
Total (8)	2816	38	1.3	2778	98.7
Non-Central Positions					
Back Pockets (2)	704	29	4.1	675	95.9
Half Forward Flankers (2)	704	91	12.9	613	87.1
Half Back Flankers (2)	704	78	11.1	626	88.8
Wings (2)	704	64	9.1	640	90.9
Forward Pockets (2)	704	80	11.4	624	88.6
Total (10)	3520	342	9.7	3178	90.3
Non-Starting Positions					
Interchange (4)	1408	106	7.5	1302	92.5
Emergencies (3)	1056	33	3.1	1023	96.9
Total (7)	2464	139	5.6	2325	94.4
OVERALL TOTALS (25)	8800	519	6.0	8281	94.0

The total number of appearances possible is the product of the number of teams (16) over the number of rounds played (22) and the number of players assigned to each position (the number of players assigned to these positions is in parentheses). * Denotes 'Key' Position.

Position Fluidity

The assumption of fluidity in positionality in the AFL was borne out by the method of recording every player's listed position for each round. Including the interchange and emergency benches, most Aboriginal players (51 percent) were listed in five or more positions. It should be noted that some positions are quite similar. For example, right halfback and left halfback (collapsed into halfback flankers in Table 1) are differentiated mostly by the side of the field on which they are located rather than by specific skills.

Positional Assignments

In comparison to their total numbers in the AFL, Aborigines were noticeably overrepresented in four starting positions and underrepresented in five starting positions. The underrepresentation was striking in three positions: not once during the season was an Aboriginal player listed to play fullback, centre half-back or centre half-forward. Table 1 represents a summary of the assignment of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal players for each match for each position during the 1998 season, based upon *The Age* and *Herald Sun* weekly lists.

Centrality

Table 1 indicates that, in general, Aborigines were overrepresented in non-central positions and underrepresented in central positions as defined by their spatial location. The pattern was particularly noticeable in contrast to the relatively even spread of non-Aboriginal athletes across both central and non-central positions. Taking into account that there are more non-central positions (10) than central (8) or interchange/emergency bench (7) on each team, we expected to find a higher percentage of players in non-central positions. However, Table 2 demonstrates that the pattern for Aboriginal players is quite different from that of non-Aborigines. Two-thirds of Aborigines were listed in non-central positions compared with 38 per cent of non-Aborigines. Further, only 7 percent of Aborigines were listed in central positions compared with 34 percent of non-Aboriginal players. The only area in which percentages were similar was the interchange/emergency bench.

Table 2   Distribution of Assignment within Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Players in Central and Non-Central Positions, and the Interchange/Emergency Bench

Positions (from Table 1)	Aborigines as % of all Aboriginal appearances	Non-Aborigines as % of all non-Aboriginal appearances
Central Positions	7	34
Non-Central Positions	66	38
Interchange/Emergency	27	28
Total	100	100

Characteristics of Positions in which Aborigines were Absent or Clustered

This section identifies the qualities associated with the central positions from which Aborigines were absent or noticeably underrepresented and the non-central positions in which they were overrepresented. We were able to extract descriptions for four of the five central positions, although none was available for 'follower'. As mentioned, follower is an inclusive term for the three positions of ruck, ruck rover and rover. Overall, descriptions of these central positions, as well as their spatial location on the field, suggest that fullback, centre halfback, centre half-forward and full forward could be considered key positions, while centre is not a 'key' position. For example, fullback is described as the 'keystone of defence . . . should be physically strong, a good long kick and possess a calm temperament' (Pascoe, 1995: 26) and 'a highly important key position' (Warren, 1982: 28) requiring 'sound judgement' (Mains, 1982: 76). Centre halfbacks are seen as 'vital links whose effectiveness is vital to the overall performance of the team' (Warren, 1982: 27) and who 'dominate' play (Pascoe, 1995: 28) — 'the springboard of many forward attacks' (Mains, 1982: 24). Centre half-forward is characterized as 'the most difficult position to play successfully' (Pascoe, 1995: 33; Warren, 1982: 26) and 'the distributor' (Mains, 1982: 14). Full-forward 'is normally the main goal kicking position . . . the most profitable play used . . . has been to lead into a defined area' (Pascoe, 1995: 35), 'demands split second judgement' (Warren, 1982: 26). It is a position where 'the most important asset . . . is to develop concentration' (Mains, 1982: 70). The centre position is the most central in terms of the grid listing and it is the central position most assigned to Aborigines. However, it is arguably a non-central position as it is described as requiring 'sharp anticipation, bursts of speed and pinpoint disposal' (Pascoe, 1995: 31). Either way, it cannot be classified as a 'key' position. Thus, Aboriginal players were completely or mostly missing from positions that were characterized in a composite way as the most difficult, dominating, highly important, calm tempered, keystone positions.

Since most Aboriginal players are listed in positions located spatially in front of and away from the centre of the field, they are overrepresented in the non-central and non-key positions of half-forward flanker, forward (also known as forward pocket), halfback flanker and winger. Half-forward flankers 'must be on the move all the time . . . are quick and dangerous near goals' (Mains, 1982: 56); it is 'one of the more difficult positions to play' (Pascoe, 1995: 33), and 'most coaches require their flankers to stay out wide . . . break infield on a tangent . . . to shoot for goal' or pass to leading forward (Warren, 1982: 35). Pascoe (1995: 35) suggests that forwards are known for their 'eye-catching performances'. Halfback flanker 'has become a more attacking position' (Pascoe, 1995: 28), 'in spite of the requirement to be disciplined generally, there is often a need for a spontaneous attack' (Warren, 1982: 33). Wingers 'can run far more widely than any other player . . . have been fast and skilful' (Pascoe, 1995: 30), have 'strength, agility, anticipation and pace' (Mains, 1982: 60) and 'their speed can always be used to great effect in all team patterns' (Warren, 1982: 34). In general, Aboriginal players are concentrated in positions characterized by speed, quickness, anticipation, spontaneity and flair.

Overall, these findings indicate that the over- and underrepresentation of Aboriginal players in specific positions coincides with racist stereotypes about their 'innate' skills. However, it should be noted that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal players were equally represented in the non-starting interchange/emergency positions. This finding does not concur with research from other countries — particularly the USA — where 'white' players tend to be overrepresented in similar positions. Thus, the interchange/emergency finding requires further investigation.

Discussion

> For Aboriginal people, the game provided an opportunity to compete on an equal footing with white Australia where, for the duration of the game, it was body against body and they could be judged on sporting ability alone. (Narrator of *Marn Grook*; Mulcahy and McGregor, 1996)

On the one hand, a growth in the number of Aborigines in the AFL can be interpreted as a signifier of increasing opportunity for indigenous people in one of Australia's most popular team sports. On the other hand, gaining access to the AFL is simply the first step in the competitive world of elite football: there is a distinction between being recruited by a club and converting this to a regular place on the field. For instance, Tatz (1998: 5) suggests that the increase in numbers represents the inclusion of Aboriginal players 'as a special black breed of gladiators and entertainers' rather than as equals in the sport. Elsewhere in Australia, researchers have noted a paradox of achievement, in that the appointment of Aboriginal people to very high-ranking government positions has come at a time when the government's enthusiasm for Aboriginal land rights is waning. Similarly, the celebration of central desert Aboriginal art works 'subverts' racial 'denigration', but simultaneously draws Aboriginal culture to mainstream 'commodity markets' (Connell and Irving, 1992: 234). Although Aboriginal players are entering the AFL in record numbers, they are doing so at a time when the increasing professionalization of elite sport promotes a shift towards employing people with business rather than sports backgrounds. Thus the opportunities for any players to subsequently become club leaders are being reduced. Furthermore, selection does not guarantee full acceptance of Aboriginal athletes. Aboriginal AFL players have long been subject to overt racist abuse by both their competitors and spectators. Although the AFL has taken action against racial slurs by establishing a code of conduct and financial sanctions against those perpetrators, we have argued that defining this overt behaviour as 'racism' in its entirety has certain limitations.

By looking at patterns of difference in position assignment, we have identified possible structural or institutional indicators of disadvantage or discrimination against Aboriginal players. Our study suggests that Aboriginal athletes may not be competing on an equal footing with non-Aboriginal players. In contrast to studies of North American sports, which have much more rigid and strict position responsibilities, and despite the game fluidity and interchangeability of positions

in the AFL, we maintain that Aborigines may be even more segregated into field positions than black athletes in other sports. Research from other sports and countries indicates that, where racial minorities are positionally underrepresented, it is not to the point of total exclusion, as is the case in the AFL with the positions of fullback, centre halfback and centre half-forward. This finding is surprising in light of the fact that many Aboriginal footballers not only play for all-Aboriginal teams in high-level leagues, but are also scouted by AFL teams in these competitions. Thus, Aboriginal players have demonstrated the ability to play all positions on the field.

Conclusions

Our findings suggest that stereotypes about Aboriginal athletes may play a role in positional assignment, a conclusion that has been put forward in other research on race relations in sport. If, as Cashmore (1982) argues, many coaches accept racist stereotypes and act upon them, it would not be surprising to find more Aborigines in positions that draw upon the skills and abilities that are part of these rigid cultural perceptions.

However, this study represents only a first step in investigating the complex dynamics that determine the experiences of Aboriginal athletes in the AFL. To stop here would be to fall into the narrow and inadequate descriptiveness for which some North American research has been critiqued. Instead, as Malcolm (1997: 267) argues, 'the trends outlined by the quantitative data should . . . serve as a base from which further qualitative studies and research may be stimulated'. Thus, this study serves as a starting-point for further qualitative research into the attitudes and beliefs of AFL players, coaches and administrators about the opportunities for Aborigines — not just in elite Australian Rules football, but also in Australian sport in general.

Note

1. We acknowledge the contested nature of the use of the terms 'Aborigine' and 'Aboriginal'. Many indigenous people, including Torres Strait Islanders, define themselves in terms of tribal and/or regional affiliation (e.g. Koori or Murri) rather than as a national group (Tatz, 1995).

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