

# Noble athlete, savage coach: How racialised representations of Aboriginal athletes impede professional sport coaching opportunities for Aboriginal Australians

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## Abstract

Representations of Aboriginal Australian peoples as genetically predisposed to sporting prowess are pervasive and enduring perceptions. This rhetoric belongs to a larger narrative that also describes a peculiarly Aboriginal style of play: full of flair, speed and ‘magic’. Such imagery has informed a common perception that, in many team sports, Aboriginal athletes are biologically more suited to playing positions characterised by pace, trickery and spontaneity, rather than those that utilise leadership acumen and intellectual skill. There has been a great deal of academic research exploring how such essentialised and racialised representations play out for Aboriginal athletes. In this paper, however, we extend that research, examining how racialised representations of Aboriginal athletic ability affect Aboriginal coaches. Premised on interviews with 26 Aboriginal Australian coaches, we argue that representations of Aboriginal athletes as naturally suited to speed and flair, rather than leadership and sporting-intellect, help maintain an environment that limits opportunities for Aboriginal Australians seeking to move into sporting leadership roles, such as coaching. This paper sheds light on the ways in which racialised representations of Aboriginal athletes feed into a settler colonialist narrative that stymies opportunities for aspiring Aboriginal professional coaches, and speculates on the limitations of this approach, in challenging the political hegemony of settler colonialism.

## Keywords

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, indigenous, positional segregation, qualitative research, race, racial stacking, settler colonial, sport coaching

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In a 2014 episode of the Australian television satirical-sketch show *Black Comedy*, viewers are introduced to the fictional character Jerome Williams. Jerome is an Aboriginal teenager ‘born tragically with no sporting ability whatsoever’. Offered a sports-scholarship to an elite private school ‘sight unseen’, the narrator shares the jarring news that Williams is, ‘against all odds’, a desperately untalented athlete. Punctuating the *absurdity* that an Aboriginal youth could have no sporting talent, his despondent coach laments: ‘there’s thousands out there and we picked the dud’ (Black Comedy, 2014). Deliberately antagonistic, humorous and provocative, the writers<sup>1</sup> of this mockumentary caricature a pervasive social perception: that Aboriginal<sup>2</sup> Australian peoples are innately good at sport and any deviance from this standard must be an anomaly.

Premised on the lived experiences of Aboriginal coaches, our paper explores what racialised representations of Aboriginal athletic talent mean for Aboriginal coaches seeking to forge or maintain careers at the professional level of their sports. Our aim here is not to essentialise Aboriginal athletes or peoples as necessarily or innately ‘good’ at coaching. Rather, our concern is that if we continue to see Aboriginal athletes primarily in terms of their bodies and their biologies, it becomes difficult to recognise other talents, capabilities and goals they may possess. In 2015, we interviewed 26 Aboriginal coaches, who shared many positive moments from their coaching careers. However, they also described feelings of invisibility when their coaching potential was ignored, as well as experiencing exclusion, and covert and overt forms of racism. By engaging with contemporary discourse about Aboriginal people in sport, we place the stories of seven Aboriginal coaches into a larger ideological and socio-political settler colonial context. In this way, we hope to address shortcomings in the literature about Aboriginal people and sport, and shed light on the ways in which racialised representations of Aboriginal athletes perpetuate the ongoing marginalisation of aspiring Aboriginal professional coaches. In our conclusion, we speculate on the limitations of this approach in challenging the political hegemony of settler colonialism.

## **Interpretative framework: Settler colonial ideology and discourse**

In the following section, we establish a causal relationship between popular discourse about Aboriginal sporting talent and the existence of racialised barriers excluding Aboriginal coaches from professional coaching roles. Before we do that, it is important that we clarify our understanding of settler colonial ideology and its relation to discourse about Aboriginal people and sport. Settler-colonialism is premised on invasion with the explicit aim of extinguishing Indigenous sovereignty, and is underpinned by an obsessive desire to suffocate any attempts by Indigenous peoples to reclaim that sovereignty (Veracini, 2010; Wolfe, 1999). It erects discriminatory structures that subjugate, oppress, murder and maim, and is accompanied by massacres, policies of forced removal and other genocidal acts that reduce the Indigenous population to a ‘very small minority often on the verge of extinction’ (Maddison, 2011: 51), while bolstering the structural privilege of the settler population.

By its very nature settler colonialism is an ongoing process that perpetuates settler dominance at the expense of the Indigenous population. As Patrick Wolfe famously

noted, settlers ‘come to stay: invasion is a structure not an event’ (2006: 388). Seen this way, settler colonial ideology is much more than a moment of invasion. It is continuous in its relentless pursuit, and maintenance, of control over sovereignty (Macoun and Strakosch, 2013). Awareness of settler colonial ideology, therefore, means that we should be alert to what Maddison calls ‘the long colonial shadow’ (2011: 23). This includes an awareness of the effects of discrimination and marginalisation that continue after the colonial power has given way to an ostensibly more ‘inclusive’, anti-racist form of governance, and can be seen in the ongoing marginalisation of the Aboriginal population.

The pervasiveness of settler colonial ideology means we should also be concerned with the way that discourse about Aboriginality has, and continues, to be used to produce and reify ‘facts’ about Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians that reproduce colonialist relations of power (one symptom of which is the location of authority and leadership within the non-Aboriginal population). Discourse is a structure of representation that works through certain institutions to produce ‘knowledge’ about the individuals who interact with them (Foucault, 1970). It is the ‘publicly available ways of speaking and writing’ about, in this case, Aboriginal people, experiences and concerns (Muecke, 2005: 18; see also Langton, 1994: 99). Although discourse always feels ‘natural’ to those who use it, Michel Foucault (1970) reminds us that its internal structure is organised by a system of norms, classifications and prescriptions that reflect the ideological apparatuses that brought it into being. Discourse, in other words, reflects, and is constrained by, ideology.

At its most basic level this means that facts and theories about Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people produced within the institutions of settler colonialism (which include not only the state, but also medical, educational, academic and sporting institutions) will reflect the ideological categories of colonialism. Differences between us (settlers) and them (Aboriginal people) will thus be articulated through classificatory distinctions between primitive and civilised, physical and intellectual, natural and cultural; the organising categories of European colonialism (Said, 1978).

The operation of these organising norms can clearly be seen in representations of Aboriginal people made by early anthropologists, settlers and colonial administrators. Researchers have shown how in the early colonial period Aboriginals were seen as barbaric savages, designated the lowest rung of a racially organised hierarchical order (Haebich, 1988; Reynolds, 1989: 97). However, it is not only the overtly racist discourse of 19th- and early 20th-century Anthropology that expresses and reflects the organising categories of colonialism. Those same differentiating norms can be seen in forms of discourse that claim to convey a more sympathetic, even celebratory, attitude towards Aboriginal people and their cultures. As Stephen Muecke demonstrates in his analysis of ‘available discourses on Aborigines’, romantic assessments of Aboriginal culture as more connected to nature, more simplistic, more authentic, more closely aligned with a utopian past, carry the same presumptions about Aboriginal agency, self-determination and complexity that underpin more overtly racist discourses (2005: 25). Celebrations of Aboriginal people as more connected to nature and less corrupted by civilisation summon the image of the Noble Savage (Rowlands, 2004: 6). They evoke the idea of ‘inanimate material obeying natural forces’ (Muecke, 2005: 26) and deny Aboriginal people recognition as fully mature, self-determining subjects. This places Aboriginal people in a position of subordination relative to settler colonial subjectivities.

Others have shown how this romantic, apparently celebratory, discourse has been used to justify paternalistic control of Aboriginal people (Briscoe, 1996: 132). Our concern here is the way that this 'romantic passion' (Muecke, 2005: 25) informs the prevailing images, tropes and 'facts' used by contemporary sports writers and institutions to produce knowledge about Aboriginal athletes.

### **The 'natural' athlete: Racism masquerading as celebration**

Current public discourse about Australian sport is saturated with positive images of Aboriginal sporting excellence and participation. Notions of racial inferiority have steadily been replaced by references to natural sporting talent, superior physicality and innate sporting abilities. Professional sporting organisations in Australia, like Australian Rules Football (AFL) and the National Rugby League (NRL), use this rhetoric to highlight the contributions of Aboriginal athletes to their sports, and serves as an indicator of the changing relations between Aboriginal Australians and non-Aboriginal Australians. However, as researchers have shown, such imagery effectively functions to reproduce the structural hierarchies of colonialism (Evans et al., 2015; Hallinan and Judd, 2009a, 2009b; Tatz, 2012).

These representations of Aboriginal Australian peoples as genetically predisposed to sporting prowess are pervasive. Ideas about fast twitch muscles (Lillee, cited in Hallinan and Judd, 2009a: 1227), a more intuitive understanding of time and space (Sheedy, cited in Hallinan and Judd, 2009a: 1227) and superior speed and movement built up through '40,000 years of hunting and gathering' (AFL Recruiters, cited in Hallinan and Judd, 2014: 62) abound in the Australian media (Cashman, 1995; Coram, 2007; Lattas, 1997) and in the language of sporting coaches and athletes (Hallinan et al., 1999; Tatz, 2009; Tatz and Adair, 2009). Research has also shown that this occurs in the self-descriptions of Aboriginal athletes (Adair and Stronach, 2011; Godwell, 2000; Hallinan and Judd, 2009a). Although based on highly racialised notions of biology and natural talent, this discourse has nonetheless gained legitimacy by seeming to explain a very real statistical over-representation of Aboriginal athletes within some professional sports (Coram, 2007; *Creative Spirits*, 2015; Tatz, 1995) in terms of innateness: Aboriginal athletes have succeeded in professional sports because Aboriginal peoples are said to be 'born to play' (Tatz, 2009: 23; see also Hallinan et al., 1999).

Racialised stereotyping also characterises the style of play that is commonly associated with Aboriginal athletes. Across a range of sports, Hallinan and colleagues showed that Aboriginal athletes were perceived as having a signature style of play, typified by speed, flair and spontaneity. Because of this stereotype, Aboriginal athletes have often been typecast as more suitable to particular positions: those which capitalise on speed and spontaneity, rather than leadership acumen and on-field strategic intelligence (Hallinan, 1991; Hallinan et al., 1991; Hallinan and Judd, 2009b). An extension of Loy and McElvogue's (1970) study of racial stacking, positional segregation explains why athletes of certain cultural and racial backgrounds end up being under, or over-represented in specific playing positions (Hallinan, 1991; Lavoie, 1989; Yu and Bairner, 2011; see also Hoberman, 1997; Kochman, 1981).

For example, the colonialist implications of this discourse about Aboriginal sporting talent is evident in a quote by eminent AFL player Tony Lockett about his Aboriginal teammate Michael O'Loughlin:

Mick had something that was a little different. He had real good skills and he just knew where the ball was going to be. He had something special that players can't learn. I think you've either got it or you don't. Those blokes are pretty rare but it's more common among our indigenous [sic] fellas. They just seem to have the knack, that something different (cited in Evans et al., 2015: 59).

There are a number of things occurring in this quote. Most obviously, Lockett asserts that O'Loughlin's sporting success is the result of factors common to 'Indigenous fellas', factors that 'can't be learnt'. This infers a racial and biological explanation for talent (something Aboriginal players *naturally* have). Consequently, it denies the role that aspiration, strategic planning, mental attitude and intense training necessarily have in forging a career as a professional sportsperson. The same suggestion is carried by 'pseudo-scientific claims' that Aboriginal athletes have athletic 'genes' (Tatz, 2009: 16), where Aboriginal over-representation in professional sport is a product of genetics, rather than a myriad of political and historical structures, social environments and personal choices, in which ball skills, for instance, might be developed (Biesheuvel, 1979; Tatz, 2009).

Returning to Lockett's comments, the suggestion that O'Loughlin has something 'special' which 'can't be learnt' also suggests a mysterious origin for Aboriginal sporting talent. No longer just attributed to nature or biology, commonly used descriptors of a supposedly Aboriginal 'style of play' such as 'magical', intuitive (Hallinan et al., 1999: 372) and 'clairvoyance' (Tatz, 2009: 20) indicate a level of skill above and beyond the ordinary athlete; they recall images of tribal magic and the mysteries of initiation. They suggest a talent that is uncanny, special, but also resistant to rational explanation.

A number of Australian sports researchers have examined the effect that this discourse about Aboriginal athleticism has on opportunities for Aboriginal players (Gorman et al., 2015; Hallinan, 1991; Hallinan and Judd, 2009b; Tatz, 2009). For example, Hallinan (1991) revealed that Aboriginal players held positions with the least involvement of any field-playing role within New South Wales (NSW) rugby league competitions. In 1999, Hallinan et al. demonstrated that essentialising stereotypes about Aboriginal sportspeople informed the assignment of Aboriginal AFL players to non-central field positions that place emphasis on speed and quickness, and away from positions widely believed to require intellectual and leadership skills. Evidence of positional segregation in Australian sport shows how racist assumptions about Aboriginality inform institutional processes (selection, recruitment, positional placement) that, then, appear to demonstrate the truth of the assumptions. As Hallinan and Judd (2009b) illustrated in their analysis of AFL recruiters' attitudes about Aboriginal sportsmen, racialised assumptions about Aboriginal talents and 'natural' capacities informed the way they recruited Aboriginal players into the AFL, the positions that they were assigned to, and the way that the performance of these athletes was understood and celebrated. Recruited for their speed and flair, it is these qualities that grab the headlines and affirm the stereotype of Aboriginal AFL players. Other styles of play exhibited by Aboriginal players receive less attention, as do the social and political conditions under which particular skills are developed. This complex



network of mutually reinforcing processes means that Aboriginal players rarely get the opportunity to demonstrate, or be acknowledged for, leadership skills.

The implications of racialised stereotyping for Aboriginal athletes have been well documented (Adair, 2012; Adair and Stronach, 2011; Cashman, 1995; Coram, 2007; Hallinan, 1991; Kearney, 2014; Lattas, 1997; Rigney, 2003; Tatz and Adair, 2009). However, we know little about how racialised representations of Aboriginal athletes might affect opportunities for aspiring Aboriginal sport *coaches*.

## Aboriginal sport coaches

Aboriginal sport coaches have worked at the highest level of professional sport. For example, in the 1970s and 1980s, Arthur Beetson coached Easts (NRL) while Graham ‘Polly’ Farmer worked as an AFL head coach. More recently, Claude Williams coached the Sydney Kings basketball team, Kevin Coombs became the first Aboriginal to coach at a Paralympic Games, and Tony Mundine trained his son Anthony Mundine to a World Boxing Association World Super Middleweight boxing championship. Having Laurie Daley<sup>3</sup> hold one of the most prominent coaching roles within the NRL is an excellent recent addition to high performance coaching ranks; however, his role involves coaching just three games per year – not week in–week out for 26 rounds like the head coach of an NRL club.

Tellingly, recent Government statistics show that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, who make up around 3% of the Australian population, occupy only 173 of the 21,333 full-time coaching roles across Australia – around 0.8% of all coaches (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). In stark contrast to the statistical over-representation of Aboriginal professional athletes in some Australian professional sports (where statistics are available), not a single team in each of the Australian professional sport leagues (e.g. AFL, NRL, Super Rugby (ARU), Trans-Tasman Netball League, A-league (football (soccer))) has a full-time, permanent Aboriginal *head coach* on their staff. In the AFL and NRL, for example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders make up approximately 9% and 11% of players respectively (AFL, 2014; Australian Rugby League Commission Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) 2014–2017, 2014) yet there are *no head coaches* at this level. This is in spite of an official policy within the AFL’s 2014–2016 RAP to ‘Increase the overall level of Indigenous Australians who participate in our game as players, coaches and umpires’ (2014: 5). Furthermore, there are a range of professional sports in Australia that have almost no Aboriginal involvement in playing and coaching so the over-representation mainly occurs in just a few male professional sports. This is curious given that many of these sporting bodies represent themselves as inclusive organisations committed to the strategic aims of RAPs (e.g. AFL, NRL, Netball Australia, ARU; Milward et al., 2015). Sporting organisations see themselves as the bastion of reconciliation, celebrating and supporting (with huge material investment) Aboriginal athletic talent (Evans et al., 2015), yet, high levels of Aboriginal athletic participation at the professional level have not translated into a similar increase of Aboriginal coaches.

## Research context

In 2015, three non-Aboriginal Australian academics embarked on a study to hear the stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander coaches<sup>4</sup> who worked in various

employment and volunteer capacities. In our study, we spoke with 26 male and female coaches who were currently in roles within urban, rural and remote settings, across a range of sports (including Rugby League, Netball, Rugby Union, Football (Soccer), Boxing, Cricket, Athletics, Basketball and Australian Rules Football).<sup>5</sup> Our coaches worked in contexts from community sport (e.g. local netball leagues) to high performance professional leagues (e.g. national basketball leagues). We spoke with coaches who were early in their career and those who had more than 40 years' experience in coaching. Some of the coaches had experience in Aboriginal-specific sport programmes, within schools, in semi-professional settings (i.e. the tier below full-time professional leagues) or working in professional leagues around the globe. Their qualifications ranged from introductory (i.e. Level 1 in AFL) to advanced coaching certificates (i.e. Level 3 in Rugby Union). All had qualifications in other areas of work or were currently employed in roles other than coaching. Some aspired to higher levels, but as we explore in this paper with seven of these coaches, aspirations were sometimes stymied by structural, organisational, and interpersonal issues.

Throughout the research process, we championed the position that Aboriginal marginalisation is not a 'problem to be solved' by non-Aboriginal Australian academics, with all the paternalistic and colonialist baggage associated with such an attitude (Darnell, 2007; Maddison, 2009: 1; Nakata, 2007). Instead, we have tried to act as conduits for the dissemination of the experiences and insights of our collaborators (Apoifis, 2016). While we make no claims that our methodological approach is impervious to critique, and stress the need for unending awareness of overt and covert paternalistic and colonialist research practices (Rossi and Rynne, 2014; Smith, 1999), we devised a five-pronged research approach that engages with the aforementioned concerns.

First, and from the outset, guiding this study was the long-term goal of creating meaningful partnerships with Aboriginal coaches, Aboriginal communities and Australian sporting organisations, to establish clear coaching pathways for Aboriginal Australians. Second, conscious of methodological calls to move beyond a solely deficit approach to Aboriginal research (where fieldworkers focus on failure, helplessness and then problem solving, rather than co-constructing solutions) (Craven et al., 2016; Dei, 2005; Rossi et al., 2013), we asked coaches about both facilitators *and* barriers to their coaching pathways. That is, we wanted to know what Aboriginal coaches had been doing to forge successful careers, as well as understand the barriers that had, at times, prevented them reaching their goals. Third, although we had pre-prepared interview questions, we practiced a largely open ended and conversational style of interviewing. This is consistent with how other non-Aboriginal researchers engage with Aboriginal interviewees and demonstrates a process of dialogue that is both culturally sensitive and reflexive ('Yotti'Kingsley et al., 2010). Fourth, to maintain a high degree of collaboration and input from Aboriginal participants (Hallinan, 2015; Hallinan and Judd, 2012) and concerned stakeholders, such as representatives from major sporting bodies, we facilitated a public forum at Western Sydney University, Australia, on Aboriginal coaching pathways.<sup>6</sup> This event was live-streamed across the world, allowing people in regional and remote settings to be part of the conversation – a key geographical consideration when researching alongside Aboriginal communities worldwide. Fifth, and finally, throughout the project we paid attention to agency and voice through a highly reflexive process involving constant feedback and engagement with our Aboriginal collaborators (Nakata,

2007: 113). We: (a) consulted Aboriginal colleagues before drafting the Ethics application and interview guide; and (b) sent interviewees transcripts for confirmation. Importantly, our project was also guided by regular feedback from two experienced Aboriginal sports coaches.

Despite numerous calls for further investigation into the relationship between essentialising stereotypes about Aboriginal athleticism, positional segregation and opportunities at the coaching and management level (Hallinan, 2015; Hallinan and Judd, 2009a; Stronach et al., 2014; Tatz, 2012), little work has been done in this area. It is our contention that the lack of professional Aboriginal coaches in Australia can be explained by powerful, deep-seated beliefs about Aboriginal talents and capacities which assume that Aboriginal people make better players and athletes than they do sporting leaders. This manifests most obviously in the blindness that sporting organisations exhibit towards highly qualified, experienced Aboriginal coaches.

### **Exclusion, discrimination and being overlooked: Experiences of Aboriginal sports coaches**

In our discussion with community based (local club coaches), semi-professional (representative level coaches), and aspiring professional level coaches (that is, the highest level of sport below international competition, where coaches can be employed full-time and earn a living wage through coaching (Bennie and O'Connor, 2012a, 2012b)) we were confronted with a recurring theme where some of the Aboriginal coaches felt they had been excluded from certain coaching positions because of their Aboriginality (even when coaches had played at the highest level in their sport, and were highly accredited and experienced). From their experiences and their interactions with peak bodies and boards, alongside conversations with their Aboriginal colleagues and peers, an enduring narrative prevailed of exclusion from top-level coaching positions based on their Aboriginal identity. These experiences of exclusion sometimes follow the logic of overt discrimination, but at times the operations of discursive power are subtle, and manifest more clearly in the way that coaches are *seen* (or, rather, remain unseen).

To begin, a number of our collaborators shared experiences of being excluded from coaching positions because of their Aboriginality. As Nathan (Rugby Union) put it, although suitably qualified for a major coaching role, 'I just think they didn't want to have an Aboriginal head coach'. This coach qualified that while the individuals involved in the decision making process would have argued that they were not racist, he felt that, to put it simply, 'they don't want an Aboriginal doing the good position [as head coach]'. Equally, Wally (Rugby League) lamented:

If I get beat for a position nowadays, and I've questioned a couple of times in my own mind, not out loud, 'Is it because I'm Aboriginal? Is it because I'm Indigenous?' And I think there are probably two times that I can say yes, the rest no.

This is a more recent extension of the overt segregation of Aboriginal peoples from wider participation in sport. Indeed, Ricky (Rugby Union) talked of a 'cultural ceiling', fortified by networks of privilege in which Aboriginality intersects with class and social



position to exclude Aboriginal coaches from opportunities more readily available to 'white Anglo-Saxon males'. Overtly racist and discriminatory at its core, Colin Tatz has extensively documented the ways in which Australian sporting organisations and government authorities deliberately excluded Aboriginal peoples from organised competitive sport, via such spurious claims as inferior moral character and intelligence (Tatz, 1995, 2009; see also Tatz and Adair, 2009). Nathan (Rugby Union), Wally (Rugby League) and Ricky's (Rugby Union) experiences are an extension of this phenomenon, a more contemporary *modernised* version of overt exclusion. Unlike the recent past, the racism here is not formulated in institutionalised, codified policies of exclusion (Tatz, 1995). Instead, it is driven by representations – or, more accurately, misrepresentations – of Aboriginal sportspeople. Social perceptions about Aboriginal athletes framed as a specific form of physical capital, comes at the expense of conceptualising Aboriginal athletes as potential leaders with sporting intellect.

Another theme of our discussions with Aboriginal coaches was the experience of *invisibility*. As Rohanee (Netball) said, 'I think the invisibility is a big issue even with our very elite [Aboriginal] athletes. I don't think there's enough excitement around the potential that they may make as coaches in their own right.' Some coaches felt that their talents and potential were not recognised by sporting organisations, and that they were simply not seen in the same way as their non-Aboriginal colleagues. Whereas professional non-Aboriginal players are often in line for coaching roles upon their retirement, this is not the case with Aboriginal players. As Kyle (AFL) put it, Aboriginal athletes are not considered as coaches, 'where if you get a non-Indigenous player that is playing the game of footy and that are really good players, they're automatically in the frame to become a coach'. Rohanee's (Netball) experience is similar. Even after a celebrated playing career, with extensive coaching experience, she did not receive the same attention and encouragement as non-Aboriginal colleagues:

It wasn't the institution saying hey come and coach, whereas I think that is quite opposite to what happened to my counterparts. I know some of my colleagues a year or two after they retired they got jobs at the Institute of Sport. Nobody's ever asked me to work at the Institute of Sport.

Rohanee's experience demonstrates the existence of what Marcia Langton refers to as '[t]he easiest and most "natural" form of racism'; that is, 'the act of making the other invisible. Indeed, racism can provide a satisfying comprehension of black identity – linked to the viewer's ideological framework' (1994: 94). As she suggests, Aboriginal experiences and identities which do not affirm the colonialist discourse that claims to know them, and know them comprehensively, disappear behind the images and representations that do. In simple terms, evidence of talent anchored in the body eclipse evidence of talent in activities and occupations where the body is not centre stage.

Another reason for this institutional blindness may be the prevalence of more overtly racist stereotypes about Aboriginal people. Jimmy (Football) mentioned a common perception that 'Aboriginals are lazy, or even, drug-users', and that 'it's a big risk at times, not a big risk in taking them on board, but it can be if you look at the way society looks at Indigenous people'. Negative cultural stereotypes about laziness may also intersect

with cultural stereotypes about Aboriginal 'natural' sporting ability because it builds the idea that where Aboriginal athletes have achieved great success it is through innate abilities related to their physical capacities, rather than hard work. This feeds into the idea that Aboriginal athletes are defined by their physical capabilities while ignoring their mental acumen. A number of coaches spoke about barriers associated with these perceptions: barriers to Aboriginal people seeking administrative, managerial, executive and coaching positions that capitalise on mental acuity, strategic thinking and planning. For example, Ricky (Rugby Union) told us that 'Aboriginal or Indigenous people around the world are often seen as good physical capital for the sport but not intellectual or, they don't have other capital that the sports want or desire'.

In each of the examples above, coaches describe experiences of exclusion – of being overlooked, left out or feeling 'unseen' by institutions imbued with the authority to 'recognise' coaching talent – as a result of their Aboriginality. While some of these experiences involve overt racism, many occurred within institutions that have RAPs, that 'celebrate' the contributions Aboriginal players have made to the game, or even have targets to increase numbers of Aboriginal coaches, administrators and managers.

It is our contention that these experiences of exclusion can, at least in part, be explained by the presence of stereotypes about Aboriginal people that limit the way they are seen. In such a context, exclusionary practices operate in the absence of policy, professional practice or even conscious belief. They are ingrained in the way that 'truths' about Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people circulate. To put it bluntly, it is not about consciously excluding Aboriginal people from coaching roles, but rather about a situation in which Aboriginal people are not even considered for those roles.

Indeed, Charlie (Football), who holds a managerial position at his *local* soccer club, mentioned the surprise that people express when they discover his Indigeneity:

[P]eople asked, 'Where are you from?' 'I'm an Aboriginal,' and they're quite surprised that an Aboriginal person has got the capacity and skills to actually be a president or a secretary or to get involved in that level because they don't see it often. At the time I was the president of two different soccer clubs and quite actively involved. I'd spend anything up to 25 or 30 hours a week at the soccer club and none of my kids played soccer.

What these examples suggest is that stereotypes about Aboriginal people (as superb, natural athletes, better suited to playing rather than coaching careers) create an institutional environment in which talented, experienced, highly accredited coaches are not given the same recognition, encouragement or support as their non-Aboriginal counterparts. This is what could be called covert, or as Ricky (Rugby Union) noted, 'institutional inferential racism'. This covert racism celebrates and prizes the talents of Aboriginal players, but for reasons that limit their opportunities down the track (Stronach et al., 2014). Less obvious than overt racist attitudes, such discrimination is built into the operations of power within sporting organisations. It is reflected by the make-up of largely male, predominately white boards (Tynan and Briggs, 2013) and other decision-making bodies, and in the investment clubs and sporting organisations make in 'Aboriginal development'. For instance, and as noted, many sporting organisations have RAPs that articulate a positive position towards Indigeneity and strive to increase participation for

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. However, RAPs and the programmes that preceded them seem to be largely invested in ‘poaching Aboriginal athletic talent’ (Adair and Stronach, n.d.), and do very little to address the under-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in positions of authority. As Nathan (Rugby Union) observed, ‘You know, they want the reconciliation because they want Aboriginal players. It’s not about the coaches’.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we placed the lived experiences and insights of our Aboriginal sporting collaborators within the wider operations of the *discursive power* of the colonialist enterprise. We established a causal relationship between mainstream discourse about Aboriginal sporting acumen, and the presence of racialised barriers excluding Aboriginal coaches from professional coaching roles. While the rhetoric of innate ability and genetic predisposition acknowledges and celebrates the unique skills of Aboriginal athletes, it does so in a way that undermines the ability of other coaches, spectators, administrators to see the athlete as a fully contemporary, modern, rational, strategic and thinking being.

Poignantly, there appears to have been a shift in recent years away from this typecasting, with some Aboriginal players now excelling in various leadership positions in professional sport teams as captains of their clubs and continuing to shine in key playmaking roles (e.g. Jonathon Thurston and Greg Inglis, NRL; Eddie Betts and Lance Franklin, AFL). We also recognise the successes of a modest wave of contemporary Aboriginal sporting coaches challenging racialised barriers: coaches in professional sport roles like Jason Gillespie in cricket and Laurie Daley in Rugby League. Their visibility helps to promote possibilities for younger generations of Aboriginal peoples while seemingly undermining ongoing colonialist narratives that limit opportunities for aspiring Aboriginal-professional coaches.

At the same time, we are cognisant of the structural limitations of this approach to fracture the settler colonial paradigm. The discourse under consideration here produces the possibility for the recognition and celebration of a range of identities. But, in doing so, it precludes others. It makes it possible for Aboriginal sports stars to enjoy a position of relative privilege within the ideological apparatus of settler colonialism embodied by the elite, professional, corporate institutions of sport. However, the recognition (and correlative investment) that underpins this success (a recognition of Aboriginal physicality as superior, magical, primitive, beyond explanation) is delivered by a discursive mechanism that also increases the reach of racism. Hokowhitu describes this double-bind well when he notes that, ‘the successful athlete of colour unwittingly reaps rewards while perpetuating the subjugation of his or her people’ (Hokowhitu, 2003: 4). Our paper has shed light on the ways in which racialised representations of Aboriginal athletes feed into a settler colonialist narrative that stymies opportunities for aspiring Aboriginal professional coaches. Arguably, however, more Aboriginal coaches at the professional level may ultimately serve the political hegemony of settler colonialism, by ‘absorbing and extinguishing Aboriginal political difference without disturbing the foundational structures of settler dominance’ (Macoun and Strakosch, 2013: 435).

To that end, we hope that our paper acts as a catalyst for future studies, where researchers work alongside Aboriginal collaborators to better understand barriers and facilitators to coaching pathways in a multitude of settings. While research into the efficacy of an Australian version of a Rooney Rule (National Football League, USA) equivalent may be insightful, further research could be better served by engaging with Aboriginal coaches involved in Aboriginal specific contexts, like the NSW Koori Knockout (Rugby League), the *Lloyd McDermott* Foundation (Rugby Union), and the Indigenous Marathon Foundation. Specifically, we call for research into Aboriginal coaching pathways that take into account the nuances of specific sports, their RAPs and their associated histories, studies that engage with class and gender discrimination as a subset of Aboriginal marginalisation, and work that considers the discrepancies or similarities within other settler-societies like the United States, Canada, and New Zealand.

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### Notes

1. The writers of the show include both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2015).
2. While the phrase Aboriginal *and* Torres Strait Islander peoples conforms with appropriate usage of terminology within Australia, our interviewees all identified as Aboriginal people of mainland Australia, rather than Torres Strait Islanders. For this reason, we use the term Aboriginal peoples/athletes, etc. When we use the term Indigenous, we acknowledge there are differences between First Nations populations within and across different countries and that there is no official definition of Indigenous people (United Nations, n.d.). However, the United Nations has suggested that Indigenous people are those who self-identify with the term 'Indigenous' and who are part of a community that has historical continuity prior to colonial and/or settler arrival. We also acknowledge that 'Aboriginal people' is a limiting and arguably inadequate term to fully encapsulate the diversity and distinctiveness of Australia's First Peoples. Finally, we followed the guidelines from Western Sydney University with respect to terminology in this manuscript ([www.westernsydney.edu.au/oatsiee/aboriginal\\_and\\_torres\\_strait\\_islander\\_employment\\_and\\_engagement/workplace\\_relations](http://www.westernsydney.edu.au/oatsiee/aboriginal_and_torres_strait_islander_employment_and_engagement/workplace_relations)). (accessed 5 July 2016)
3. Mal Meninga, coach of the Australian Rugby League team, identifies as a South Sea Islander.
4. Despite attempts, we were only able to interview Aboriginal coaches, and not Torres Strait Islander coaches.
5. This paper respects the anonymity of our respondents. We have de-identified names to restrict any workplace discrimination for our collaborators (Saunders et al., 2014).

6. The event was held at Western Sydney University, Parramatta Campus on 10 May 2016 ([www.westernsydney.edu.au/sports/home/news/featured\\_stories/aboriginal\\_and\\_torres\\_strait\\_islander\\_sports\\_coaching\\_forum#.VyFZWOR6qdM.twitter](http://www.westernsydney.edu.au/sports/home/news/featured_stories/aboriginal_and_torres_strait_islander_sports_coaching_forum#.VyFZWOR6qdM.twitter)). (accessed May 10 2016)

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