

2017/06: Racism in the AFL: should harsher, across-League penalties be imposed on racially abusive football fans?

What they said...

'Some say racist taunts "just happen" on the spur of the moment, making the excuse that passionate footy fans "just get carried away". But if each hateful insult comes at a financial cost, chances are a lot more likely that fans would think twice'

Editorial comment from The Age published on April 13, 2017, arguing that AFL spectators receive substantial fines for racial abuse

'If referring to someone as an "ape" is deemed racist by the language and thought police, there must be equal punishment for the other insults meted out at the football. In my view there are many worse insults dished out at the football that have no connection to race'

A reader comment from 'Brad' published in The Australian on April 13, 2017 opposing penalties against racial abuse by spectators

The issue at a glance

On April 8, 2017, during the round three AFL match between the Port Adelaide Power and the Adelaide Crows at Adelaide Oval instances were reported of racial abuse directed at two indigenous players, Eddie Betts and Patrick Ryder.

Port Adelaide issued an indefinite suspension to one of its members who racially abused Betts during the April 8 game. The Crows have been unable to act against the spectator who verbally abused Ryder as the man ran away before his identity could be determined.

Following the game, a Port Adelaide supporter posted a series of Facebook comments referring to Betts as an 'ape'. Facebook has deactivated the woman's account; however, as she is not a club member, Port is unlikely to be able to take action against her.

In response to these incidents the AFL is considering what further measures it can put in place to discourage racial abuse among spectators.

On April 13, 2017, it was announced that a number of punitive measures for racially abusive football supporters, (including lifetime bans prohibiting members from entering home grounds) were about to be debated by the AFL Commission. Rather than leave individual clubs to impose penalties, the League is considering taking over the imposition of supporter penalties. The Age newspaper has also recommended that large fines be imposed on racially abusive fans.

The incidents and the proposed responses to the problem have provoked a range of comments.

Background

(The timeline of AFL-related racial abuse incidents was taken from an Age report titled 'Infamous AFL racism incidents' published on April 11, 2017. The full text can be accessed at <http://www.theage.com.au/afl/afl-news/infamous-afl-racism-incidents-20170411-gviw4p.html>)

The information regarding regulations prohibiting racial vilification is largely drawn from the AFL Vilification Framework. The full text of this document can be accessed at [s.afl.com.au/staticfile/AFL%20Tenant/AFL/Files/Respect%20and%20Responsibility/AFL_Vilification_Policy.pdf](https://www.afl.com.au/staticfile/AFL%20Tenant/AFL/Files/Respect%20and%20Responsibility/AFL_Vilification_Policy.pdf))

Instances of AFL-related racial abuse over two and a half decades

1993: St Kilda's Nicky Winmar lifts his jumper and points to his skin after copping racial abuse from Collingwood's crowd at Victoria Park. "People forget that words have a big impact. They can lift a person or destroy a person. So that day I responded by saying to those people, and I still say it today: 'I'm black and I'm proud'," Winmar later said.

1995: Essendon's Michael Long is racially taunted by Collingwood's Damian Monkhorst during the Anzac Day match. Long made an official complaint which led to mediation, after which the pair shook hands - though Long remained clearly upset. The controversy led the AFL to create its racial anti-vilification policy.

1999: St Kilda's Peter Everitt racially abuses Melbourne's Scott Chisholm during a game. Everitt is suspended for four games, donates \$20,000 to a charity of Chisholm's choice and undertakes a racial awareness training program.

2011: Western Bulldogs' Justin Sherman racially vilifies an unidentified Gold Coast Suns opponent. Sherman is banned for four games, ordered to attend an education program and pay \$5000 to a charity chosen by the Suns.

2012: The AFL's national community engagement manager Jason Mifsud claims Adelaide's recruitment manager Matthew Rendell suggested clubs may adopt a policy of only recruiting Aboriginal players with at least one white parent. Rendell apologises and resigns, saying his comments were taken out of context.

2013: Sydney's Adam Goodes is called an ape by a 13-year-old Collingwood supporter during a game. Goodes points the girl out to security, saying he was distressed by the comment but adds: "People need to get around her. She's 13, she's uneducated."

2014: A 70-year-old spectator is reported to police for making racist comments to Sydney Swans players Lance Franklin and Goodes during a match against Western Bulldogs at Etihad Stadium.

2014: North Melbourne's Majak Daw is racially abused by a spectator during a match against Hawthorn in Launceston. The male spectator is evicted from the ground.

2014: West Coast's Nic Naitanui is racially abused on Twitter. The offender pleads guilty to three counts of using a carriage service to menace, harass or cause offence and is banned from creating a Twitter account.

2015: Sydney's Goodes is frequently booed by spectators. Believing the jeering to be racist, Goodes steps down from playing but returns after widespread support. He retires at the end of the season.

2016: A banana is thrown at Adelaide's Eddie Betts by a female Port Adelaide supporter during a game. "A banana being thrown at an indigenous man is unambiguously racist," AFL chief Gillon McLachlan says. Port suspend the woman's club membership indefinitely.

2017: Adelaide's Betts is racially abused by a Port fan during a game, and by another Port supporter on social media. Port's Paddy Ryder is also racially vilified by a Crows supporter during the same game.

Anti-vilification regulations in the AFL pertaining to players

The AFL has undertaken a wide range of measures to create an inclusive competition. Many of its strategies are educative. Its anti-vilification regulations regarding players centre on Rule 35.

Rule 35: Discrimination and Racial and Religious Vilification

The purview of the AFL Player Rules extends only to those involved in Australian football at the AFL competition level.

Rule 35.1 Prohibited Conduct states:

No person subject to these Rules shall act towards or speak to any other person in a manner, or engage in any other conduct which threatens, disparages, vilifies or insults another person (the person vilified) on any basis, including but not limited to a person's race, religion, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin, special ability/disability or sexual orientation, preference or identity.

Anti-vilification regulations in the AFL pertaining to members and officials

Clause 4.1 of the Vilification & Discrimination Section of the Member Protection Policy states:

No league participant or Club Official shall engage in conduct which may reasonably be considered to incite hatred towards, contempt for, ridicule of or discrimination against a person or group of persons on the ground of their race, religion, gender, colour, sexual preference, orientation or identity, or special ability/disability.

Measures taken to control the behaviour of fans

In recent years a number of Australian Rules clubs, at junior, semi-professional and professional levels, have established spectator codes of conduct. For example,

Port Adelaide implemented a spectator code of conduct in 2014 'for all its members and supporters to ensure Adelaide Oval provides a family friendly environment at its games'.

Among the sanctions that clubs can impose is the immediate eviction of the offending fan from the stadium.

Clubs can also impose bans on club members for a particular number of seasons, for an indeterminate period or permanently.

A club can also make a member's capacity to attend its home ground matches conditional on the offending spectator taking part in a racial awareness education program.

Internet information

The AFL's Vilification Framework which sets out its inclusive and anti-discriminatory objectives and the measures it has put in place to bring them about can be accessed at

[s.afl.com.au/staticfile/AFL%20Tenant/AFL/Files/Respect%20and%20Responsibility/AFL_Vilification_Policy.pdf](https://www.afl.com.au/staticfile/AFL%20Tenant/AFL/Files/Respect%20and%20Responsibility/AFL_Vilification_Policy.pdf)

On April 13, 2017, The Brisbane Times published a report by Caroline Wilson titled 'Lifetime bans for racially abusive AFL supporters on the cards'

The report outlines penalties to be considered by the AFL Commission for racially abusive fans.

The full text can be accessed at <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/afl/afl-news/lifetime-bans-for-racially-abusive-afl-supporters-on-the-cards-20170413-gvkpeh>

On April 13, 2017, The Age published an editorial titled 'Fining AFL fans for racist abuse would help drive message home'

The editorial advocates imposing heavy fines on AFL fans who racially abuse players.

The full text of the editorial can be accessed at <http://www.theage.com.au/comment/the-age-editorial/fining-afl-fans-for-racist-abuse-would-help-drive-message-home-20170413-gvkij6.html>

On April 12, 2017, The Adelaide Advertiser published a comment by Andrew Bolt titled 'Arrest over alleged racial abuse inflames a bad situation'

Bolt argues that some of the penalties being proposed for a woman who made racist comments on Facebook against Indigenous Crows footballer Eddie Betts are an over-reaction.

The full comment can be accessed at <http://www.adelaidenow.com.au/news/opinion/andrew-bolt-arrest-over-alleged-racial-abuse-inflames-a-bad-situation/news-story/a331029210737e805dec07726648b301>

On April 12, 2017, The Sun Herald published an abbreviated version of Andrew Bolt's comment titled 'Serious Crime Unit investigates rude word on Facebook'

This comment is followed by a number of reader responses.

All texts can be accessed at <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/blogs/andrew-bolt/why-is-labor/news-story/702e0b9c92d37ca1cf45ef4f77f4a157>

On April 12, 2017, The Australian published a comment by Patrick Smith titled 'Racist AFL fans learn nothing from Goodes experience'

The comment argues that the persistence of racially abusive comments and actions from AFL fans demonstrates the difficulty of irradiating such conduct.

The comment is followed by 83 replies from readers, many of which either dispute that the behaviour referred to was racist or that it is within the province of the AFL to try to regulate fan behaviour of this type.

The point of view followed by reader comments can be accessed at <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/sport/opinion/patrick-smith/racist-afl-fans-learn-nothing-from-goodes-experience/news-story/ceab9a983b3e3ff021a0a74a202cd97e>

On April 11, 2017, ABC News published a report titled 'Port Adelaide Power takes action over Eddie Betts racist abuse' The report detailed the actions being taken by Port Adelaide against a racially abuse fan and strategies being considered by the AFL as a whole.

The report can be accessed at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-04-11/power-take-action-over-eddie-betts-racism-abuse/8433694>

On April 11, 2017, the AFL Players Indigenous Advisory Board published an open letter to the football community titled 'How long must we put up with this?'

The letter is a response to the racial abuse directed at Eddie Betts and Patrick Ryder.

The full letter can be accessed at <http://www.aflplayers.com.au/article/an-open-letter-to-the-football-community/>

On April 11, 2017, The Adelaide Advertiser published an opinion piece written by Indigenous journalism student, Douglas Smith, titled 'Footy bigotry hurts all indigenous Australians'

The full text can be accessed at <http://www.adelaidenow.com.au/news/opinion/doug-smith-footy-bigotry-hurts-all-indigenous-australians/news-story/16c07f9770b39d939bc7d7d61b84e868>

On April 10, 2017, The Sporting News published a report titled 'Another Showdown ends in racist slurs'

The report included a claim from a woman who had called Eddie Betts 'an ape' on her Facebook page that she did not intend the remark to be racist.

The full text can be accessed at <http://www.sportingnews.com/au/afl/news/another-showdown-ends-in-racist-slurs-afl-port-adelaide-power-crows-eddie-betts/1jwm7wyalakis1b03abcaz6qth>

On April 10, 2017, The Guardian published a comment by Craig Little titled 'All about heart and hate - the bedrock of any AFL rivalry worth its salt'

Little argues that intense regional antipathies are at the heart of what give many AFL fans their passion for the game.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2017/apr/10/all-about-heart-and-hate-the-bedrock-of-any-afl-rivalry-worth-its-salt>

On April 10, 2017, The Herald Sun published a comment by Susie O'Brien titled 'Vile social media posts after Port v Crows Showdown prove racism still prevalent in AFL'

O'Brien argues that the AFL, its clubs and players have the capacity to address negative social attitudes.

The comment can be accessed at <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/victoria/susie-obrien-brawl-at-footy-match-shows-racism-still-prevalent-in-afl/news-story/19de73e9ffe91868acab559592332415>

On August 22, 2016, The Herald Sun published a report titled 'She quite clearly recognises that she's made a terrible mistake'

Part of the report deals with comments purportedly made by the father of a woman penalised for throwing a banana at Indigenous football player Eddie Betts. The man claims his daughter's act was not intended to be racist.

Arguments in favour of harsher penalties for racially abusive football fans

1. Football stadiums are not privileged spaces where laws and penalties do not apply

It has been argued that AFL crowds cannot be treated as a group separate from the rest of Australian society, and thus the same standard of civil behaviour should be expected of barracking fans as is expected of adults in any public place. Colin Tatz, in his 1995 study 'Aborigines in Sport: Obstacle Race', stated, 'Sport is not divorced from life, from the civic culture of a society, from its institutions and processes, its economic, legal and educational systems, its national politics and foreign relations.'

On July 31, 2015, The Australian Human Rights Commission published a joint statement from 158 organisations across Australia condemning the booing of Adam Goodes and indicating that it could not be excused as 'just banter'. The statement contends, 'To dismiss claims of racism as just banter is to use football as a shield for prejudice. Legitimate barracking for one's team is a tradition that has been alive as long as the game itself but, when such behaviour coincides with cultural displays and Goodes' efforts to stop racism, it is clear that a line has been crossed to racial abuse.'

More recently, the AFL Players' Indigenous Advisory Board has also stated that enthusiastic barracking is not a justification for racist abuse. The Board has written, 'We want football fans to barrack for their club with passion, but shouting abuse at an opposition player and targeting their race needs to stop.'

The Board has not only claimed that football barracking does not excuse racism, it has argued that racist behaviour is contrary to the spirit of the game. It has stated, 'Anyone who thinks that this is an acceptable way to act is no football fan.'

Other commentators have argued that barracking is not simply a thoughtless act for which fans cannot be held responsible and that the AFL has to put penalties in place to encourage supporters to consider what they are saying. An editorial published in The Age on April 13, 2017, stated, 'Some say racist taunts "just happen" on the spur of the moment, making the excuse that passionate footy fans "just get carried away". But if each hateful insult comes at a financial cost, chances are a lot more likely that fans would think twice.'

2. Current penalties and processes have not prevented football fans from being racially abusive

Many commentators have claimed that the recurrence of racist abuse among AFL fans demonstrates that current measures to discourage such behaviour have been unsuccessful.

On April 12, 2017, The Australian's senior sports commentator, Patrick Smith, stated, 'Perhaps people don't care. Or at least don't care enough anymore. Or never really understood.'

Unpleasant incidents involving racial vilification continue at AFL grounds no matter what has gone before them.

There have been regular incidents of vilification in the indigenous game. Brilliant Aboriginal players Nicky Winmar and Michael Long signalled it to the world in the 1990s. It used to be everywhere, on the ground and in the stands.

And even well-intentioned education programs and television campaigns cannot prevent it.'

Smith then detailed the systemic booing, which led to Indigenous player Adam Goodes leaving the game, as proof that the AFL is currently unable to regulate crowd behaviour.

Smith stated, 'It was a critical moment in AFL football as well as the nation's sport. Even though Goodes and others including Sydney officials had said that Goodes believed the booing an expression of racism, the booing only got louder. Not even when players of opposition sides asked their fans not to boo Goodes did the unpleasantness stop...

Large sections of the AFL crowd would not be told by anyone what was racist behaviour... They were comfortable that their behaviour did not constitute vilification but it did devastate Goodes and humbled the AFL.'

AFL Players' Indigenous Advisory Board chair Shaun Burgoyne has stressed that current instances of racist behaviour by fans are not acceptable and that something further needs to be done to address the problem.

Burgoyne has stated on behalf of the Board, 'We're sad that our brothers and sisters are still experiencing racial vilification despite the ongoing education and promotion done within the football industry and wider society.'

This has been happening for far too long and we, as indigenous footballers, have had enough. We deserve more respect than we are being shown.'

The same point has been made in an editorial published in The Age on April 13, 2017. The editorial states, 'The frustrating, distressing truth is that this shameful behaviour keeps happening. It happened again just last weekend in Adelaide.'

It was 22 years ago that Michael Long famously called football out on racism, making an official complaint about a racist sledge by Damian Monkhorst. This case and Nicky Winmar's famous jumper lift two years earlier proved turning points for race relations in football and led to the AFL's groundbreaking racial anti-vilification policy

But two decades on, and despite some impressive work by the AFL to address this issue, the taunts keep coming. It is only two seasons ago that Adam Goodes was racially bullied, and disgracefully forced off the ground.'

The editorial concluded by calling for the AFL to impose large fines on fans who racially abuse players. The editorial states, 'The AFL, Indigenous players and many others have for more than two decades worked in good faith at changing attitudes, but more needs to be done.'

The Age supports the use of a financial stick to drive this important lesson home. We understand that real change takes time, but surely, enough is enough.'

3. Allowing racial abuse among AFL crowds is poor role modelling for children

Some of those who argue for fines against fans who utter racial abuse and for an all-of-League approach to the problem claim these measures are necessary to protect children against poor role modelling.

According to this line of argument, sporting competitions are powerful learning environments for children where they are

exposed to athletes whom they are likely to hero-worship and regard as role models. Some commentators have noted that if children are also exposed to racism in the context of AFL games they may come to accept racist attitudes as normal or even desirable.

ABC Indigenous sports commentator Charlie King has stressed that modelling racism and denigrating Indigenous sporting heroes can have a particularly negative effect on Indigenous children. King has stated, 'If we start attacking the Indigenous community's heroes that sends a very negative message out to young people and particularly young Indigenous people.'

Fear of negative role modelling makes some parents reluctant to take their children to AFL games. In August 2016, after the incident in which a female fan threw a banana at Eddie Betts, another fan was reported as saying he just wanted to take his family to an AFL game unmolested by spectators shouting foul language or racist taunts.

An Age editorial published on April 13, 2017, stressed that the behaviour children see now will shape their adult behaviour. The editorial stated, 'Children watching at home today [must] know where to draw the line when they come to the stadiums as adults.'

4. Racial abuse injures Indigenous players, their families and all Indigenous Australians

The on-going racist abuse which some AFL players have endured from fans is a cause of pain and distress to them, their families and to all Indigenous Australians.

Hawthorn and Power premiership player, Shaun Burgoyne, speaking in his capacity as AFL Players' Indigenous Advisory Board chair, has stated, 'This has been happening for far too long and we, as Indigenous footballers, have had enough. We deserve more respect than we are being shown.'

The abuse directed towards players is more than just words and people need to understand the impact that it has on the player, their family, their children and their community.

While it's heartening that these incidents are being called out, there's a lot of work to do before we can claim to be a truly inclusive game.'

AFL players and administrators have acknowledged the damaging effect that racial abuse has on Indigenous players and their families. Following the incidents on April 8, 2017, the Crows chief executive Andrew Fagan claimed that his club 'strongly' condemned racial vilification. Fagan stated, 'In listening to our playing group and our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander players in particular, it is clear how damaging and impactful racism is to them and their families.'

It has been noted that racist abuse directed at Indigenous AFL players affects all other Indigenous Australians.

Indigenous sports players are role models for their people and are seen as representative of high achievement among other Indigenous Australians. It is therefore particularly damaging to have these players face abuse because of their skin colour.

Indigenous journalist, Douglas Smith, has stated, '[The abusive fan's] words do not only affect Eddie Betts, but every indigenous person in this country, just like the Adam Goodes saga, which divided a nation.'

Smith further explained, 'For many indigenous Australians, myself included, it didn't just feel like they were booing Adam Goodes. It felt like they were booing the rest of us too and you just pray that if you go to a game, no one starts doing it in front of you.'

Professional sport in Australia isn't just a game and professional indigenous athletes are not just regular people. They are role models...the Aboriginal community turn to in times of personal hardships and misery, which is a lot of the time. When we see someone we look up to so much being put down because of the colour of their skin, it digs away at us, it causes anxiety and it makes us feel like second-class citizens in our country.'

5. Fines and across-League action have worked to stop other undesirable player and coach behaviours and fines have had an impact on some crowd behaviours

Many critics, commentators and AFL administrators have acknowledged that the problem of fan-based racial vilification within Australian Rules football has to be addressed more strongly. One of the suggestions that has been made is for severe fines to be imposed on fans who make racially abusive remarks.

Fines have been one of the disincentives used by the AFL to discourage racist sledging between players. Players found guilty of having made racist comments about other players have been banned from playing in one or more games, which is effectively a fine as it means they are deprived of the match payments they would normally receive. Players have also had fines imposed upon them, ranging from \$5,000 to \$20,000. The money has been donated to a charity nominated by either the vilified player or his club.

Fines are a routine means of penalising AFL players and clubs for conduct that violates the rules of the code. For example, in June 2016, North Melbourne coach Brad Scott was fined \$30,000 for accusing umpires of bias. As the coach was seen as speaking on behalf of his club, North Melbourne was fined \$50,000. In March, 2016, the AFL Players Association reprimanded and fined five player managers for betting on AFL markets during 2015. They were fined between \$500 and \$1000 for placing bets of no more than \$100. In November, 2016, seven clubs were fined for inadvertently breaching the League's anti-doping regulations. The clubs were fined \$2,500 per infringing player. It has been noted that not only have fines helped to modify players', coaches' and clubs' behaviour, they have also served to change fan behaviour.

Individual ground owners impose fines for pitch invasion. The action is also the criminal offence of trespass and offenders are generally charged.

In an editorial published on April 13, 2017, The Age stated, 'The Age supports calls for fines for racist taunts at the footy. We have seen the sting of a financial penalty work in many areas where behaviour change is needed. Think of speeding

and red lights...[F]ines have helped to deal with another blight in sport, ground invasions.'

The editorial quotes a report from Age reporter Greg Baum, in which he stated, 'When the penalty for ground invasion at the MCG, for instance, was in a multiple of tens of dollars, it was a bit of a lark, almost a weekly occurrence ... Now that it is in the thousands of dollars, ranging up to nearly \$10,000, and fans are repeatedly warned about this, it almost never happens.'

It has also been proposed that stricter penalties, including lifetime bans on club members who have been found guilty of racial abuse, should be uniformly imposed. Such punishments should be implemented by the League, rather than individual clubs, so that no offending fan would be in any doubt as to the punishment he or she would receive.

The AFL's general manager of inclusion and social policy, Tanya Hosch, has stated, 'We need to have consistent processes and standards and work with all the different parties who've got responsibilities to make sure that our games are safe for everybody.'

Arguments against harsher penalties for racially abusive football fans

1. A tradition of robust barracking is part of the AFL

Those who are sceptical about the value of harsh, cross-League penalties against fans who issue supposedly racist taunts argue that it is very difficult to determine what constitutes racism in the verbally robust context of a football game. Football barracking is often verbally abusive and this has a long tradition within AFL games. Comments that would not be made in most public settings are made readily at football games. On April 10, 2017, The Guardian published a comment by Craig Little in which he defended fans' parochial loyalties. Little stated, 'It is AFL football's rivalries that do the heavy lifting in providing the game its passion and its heritage, having at their origin a sense of place - that sense of belonging that keeps us turning up week after week, loss after loss.'

On July 13, 2012, the Institute of Public Affairs published a comment by Richard Allsop in which he similarly stated, '[S]pirited barracking in public is a...[healthy] outlet for fans to express their views. A key element of football's appeal is the belief that one's own club is intrinsically better than its rivals. In a city like Melbourne, football culture has been driven by generations of love of one's own team and hatred of its rivals, and yet, at the same time, everyone has friends and relatives who support those other teams. We have all lived with the criticisms of our teams and our players.'

In an opinion piece published in The Age on April 24, 2014, Will Brodie described some of the interaction at a Geelong-Hawthorn game. He stated, 'Unofficial, unsanctioned, yelling un-PC chants of their own devising, these two bays are a throwback to a coarse era of competitive barracking...There is passion...The fans yell and point, but they remain on their patch as if held back by a force-field. They are all talk.'

AFL supporters and some commentators are concerned that the rowdy barracking at an AFL match, which for many is a large component of the game's appeal, is going to be construed as racism and banned.

In a comment published on the ABC's News site on August 11, 2015, one poster observed, in relation to barracking and accusations of racism, 'Everyone loves to get into the rowdy spirit at the footy, they love cheering the heroes, and love booing the villains. That's why we go - for the lively atmosphere.'

The players decide whether they're treated as the hero or villain, by their on-field behaviour...It's sad to see the on-field theatre of footy, construed into a politically-correct off-field witch-hunt.'

2. Fans are often not being deliberately racist

Those who are concerned about excessive penalties being imposed on fans accused of racism, stress that, for many, the taunts issued are an innocent act, made without any intention to be racist. It is also claimed that to construct taunts which are not meant to be racist as such actually serves to create racial division.

Over the last five years there have been at least three highly publicised incidents of fans calling Indigenous players 'apes' or implying this designation. On each occasion the offending fan has claimed no intent to be racist.

The mother of a 13-year-old girl who called Indigenous player, Adam Goodes, an 'ape' during a game in 2013 has since stated, 'She'd only turned 13 five days beforehand...She had no idea what she was saying...'

Picking on a 13-year-old child I thought was absolutely ridiculous and having her questioned by police without an adult being present was absolutely disgusting on the part of ... the AFL.'

The Collingwood president, Eddie McGuire, though extending an 'unconditional' apology to Adam Goodes for the young Collingwood fan's comment also said, 'I think, you know, she might have lit a fuse that she didn't even understand was involved...She was a 13-year-old girl from ... country Victoria, she had no idea what she was doing, what she was saying.'

When on August 20, 2016, a fan was given a life-time ban from her club for throwing a banana at Indigenous player Eddie Betts, her father claimed that his daughter's action had been misinterpreted. The man said, 'The thing that irritates me probably the most is that we're playing the racist card here... [This was] more an act of frustration than a racist act where she's thrown a banana. You people in the media, you sensationalise anything.'

In April, 2017, a woman had her Facebook account deactivated for calling Eddie Betts an 'ape' and for suggesting he should go back to the zoo where he belonged. When later interviewed by Channel 7, the woman claimed she had not been racist, rather, she stated, 'I just don't like the players, never have liked them, never will like them,.'. She further stated that she was herself 'part-Aboriginal' and that she did not find the comments she had made racist.

The problem of defining racism was even more acute regarding the booing of Indigenous player, Adam Goodes. Many commentators regarded the persistent booing as racist; others explained it as a response to aspects of Goodes' on and off-field behaviour. Rita Panahi, a commentator for The Australian stated, 'It's all too easy to frame the debate in terms of race but it is neither accurate nor helpful in curbing unruly crowd behaviour.'

This may come as a shock to some in the media and the AFL but decent folk don't like being falsely portrayed as racists.'

3. Identifying offenders is difficult

It has been claimed that harsher penalties (whether imposed by the law, individual clubs or the League as a whole) will prove an inadequate solution to the problem of racism among AFL fans as it is very difficult to identify the offenders. On December 31, 2015, The University of Notre Dame, Australian Law Review published a paper written by Chris Davies and Neil Dunbar of James Cook University. The paper is titled 'Internal Policing of the Enduring Issue of Racism in Professional Team Sports'. The paper states, 'spectators...[represent] the main problem area for sport. The reasons for this are that it can be harder to identify the culprits and there is a lack of formal contracts between the sporting leagues and the spectators...'

A news report broadcast on Racing & Sport News on April 19, 2011, highlights the difficulty of identifying and apprehending fans who voice racial abuse.

The Hawks chief executive, Stuart Fox (referring to trying to locate a particular fan who had called out sexist taunts from the stadium) stated, 'It's not going to be easy to find the offender.'

Fox further noted, 'We've had a look at some (television) footage and it's certainly going to be hard to find from that.'

If anyone was there we would encourage them to call into the club or the AFL because then we would be in a position to take some action, but until we can find the offender we really can't do too much.'

Appealing to AFL fans more generally, Fox stated, 'I'd encourage all supporters of every club out there, if they see something or hear something that's offensive like this that they do have a right to report it.'

It's hard to manage because it puts people on the spot and can cause a bit of friction at stadiums.'

In response to the recent racial abuse directed at Indigenous player Patrick Ryder, Port Adelaide has issued a statement including the following, 'After interviewing witnesses, including immediate family of a Port Adelaide Football Club official, the club has resolved that Ryder was subject to racial abuse.'

Spectators in the immediate vicinity challenged the Crows supporter on his remarks and upon being challenged the offender ran away before stadium security could be alerted.

As a result, an official report with Adelaide Oval Stadium Management could not be lodged.'

The difficulty in identifying the offending fan has meant that no action could be taken against him. Port Adelaide has asked him to identify himself, but he has yet to do so.

Some opponents of harsher penalties for AFL supporters who make racist comments argue that if these penalties cannot be imposed because those committing the offence cannot be identified then the penalty is pointless.

4. Legal penalties, club-based fines and across-League penalties are an over-reaction

Some commentators have claimed that negative reactions toward football fans that are racially abusive are too extreme. In an opinion piece published in The Adelaide Advertiser on April 12, 2017, commentator Andrew Bolt stated, 'The politics of race and offence-taking has made us mad - completely unable to distinguish between the serious and the trivial...'

Are we crazy? Have we lost the ability to simply disapprove of something without also demanding it be banned, crushed, wiped out or dragged off to the judges to be hanged?'

Bolt argues that we have privileged racial abuse in a way that is not reasonable. He asks, 'So in what way is... [this] kind of abuse more serious than calling someone fat, stupid, lazy, dumb, ugly, gutless, dishonest or a hundred other things more personal, going to character rather than colour of skin?'

Bolt appears to be arguing that victims of such abuse would be better to ignore it. He commends Eddie Betts for doing so, stating, 'Betts is a class act, a true and forgiving gentleman who has come out of this looking even better.'

Some commentators have further suggested that if the AFL over-reacts to allegations of racism among football fans they may in fact inflame the situation. This possibility was put by one of the respondents to Andrew Bolt's comment, who suggested 'The AFL is creating the problems themselves with their extreme stance on political correctness.'

A range of social commentators have suggested that in an attempt to combat different types of racism some individuals and organisations have gone too far and converted unthinking comments into sources of offence. This opinion was made in a comment written by Hsin-Yi Lo in the Huffington Post on August 19, 2016. Hsin-Yi Lo stated 'PC has inadvertently bred a "I'm so easily offended" culture where we blow things out of proportion.'

Hsin-Yi Lo quoted former United States president George W Bush who has stated, 'The notion of political correctness has ignited controversy across the land. And although the movement arises from the laudable desire to sweep away the debris of racism and sexism and hatred, it replaces old prejudice with new ones. It declares certain topics off-limits, certain expression off-limits, even certain gestures off-limits.'

5. Education is a better means of countering racism within the AFL

Commentators who oppose the imposition of harsher penalties on fans accused of racism, either by individual clubs or across the League, argue that such penalties may well be inappropriate and counter-productive. There is the concern that such penalties only drive racism temporarily underground and may, in fact, foster greater hostility. In an opinion piece published in The Australian on May 10, 2014, Christian Kerr quoted British philosopher Roger Scruton, who has stated, 'You can penalise people for making racist remarks but the more you penalise them for making those racist remarks the more the racist thoughts will grow beneath them and you'll build up huge tensions between groups that will burst out in some other way.'

Instead, many claim the AFL has the capacity to act as a powerful educative force that can promote positive social

values. In an opinion piece published in The Herald Sun on April 10, 2017, Susie O'Brien stressed the capacity of the AFL to shape popular attitudes. This responsibility, she suggested, is borne by individual players, clubs and the League as a whole. O'Brien stated, 'Port Adelaide, for instance, has nine indigenous players, a dedicated Aboriginal Academy team and extensive Aboriginal community programs.

Bodies like the AFL should do what they can to combat sexism, racism and homophobia.

Individual players, who are such powerful role models in our community, should speak up about racist attitudes and behaviour...

In the end, it's only a game, but its power to bring out social change should not be underestimated.'

Those who support less punitive measures note that the AFL is already effectively employing educative programs. It has already developed a range of resources to teach football clubs and others the harm caused by prejudice and to help them achieve inclusion in all areas of the sport.

AFL has produced a Culturally Inclusive Community Football Club Toolkit which provides information for football clubs on the barriers and enablers of engaging those from culturally and linguistically diverse populations

The AFL has also produced a Racial Vilification - Video and Educational Resource showing an interview with Joel Wilkinson, ex Gold Coast Suns player, who discusses racism and his experience of racism during his football career. This resource contains information on how to deliver the resource, key questions, key messages and a fact sheet on racism.

The AFL has recently received funding from the Department of Social Services to provide a range of social cohesion activities targeting the inclusion of multicultural individuals in community football clubs around Australia.

It has been claimed by some that measures such as these are more likely to prove effective than punishments which may well be seen as divisive, promoting hostile attitudes rather than alleviating them. Over time, changing attitudes on field and in community clubs are hoped to change attitudes within the community at large.

Further implications

There are clear limits to the extent to which AFL clubs can manage the behaviour of spectators at football games. The absolute limit of their control was demonstrated by the continued booing of Adam Goodes. The extent to which the booing was racially motivated can be debated; however, Goodes clearly believed it to be so and AFL clubs and club captains requested that crowds refrain from booing. The AFL's administration requested that crowds refrain from booing and numerous high profile players did likewise. None of these requests was heeded. The crowds continued to boo.

Two things are notable here - attempts at moral persuasion do not always work and when the crowd is large enough and people are sufficiently anonymous, it is not going to be possible to control behaviour.

The AFL has been condemned for responding too slowly and doing too little to manage the mass hostility which Adam Goodes faced. The reality is there are few things they would have been able to do. All that is likely to have had some effect would have been if games had been halted whenever the booing occurred. However, it is not certain that even such a drastic response would have brought the results sought.

It is conceivable that given the resentment evident in many fan comments on this issue, crowds may have begun more wide-spread booing, not focussed on Goodes but on a range of other players. Would the League have ultimately faced a situation where they would have had to attempt to ban booing outright and would they have been able to achieve this? Where the objectionable behaviour is less generalised, bystander pressure appears to achieve some results. The fan who racially abused Patrick Ryder not only stopped but subsequently ran away after being challenged by a number of other spectators.

Changing the crowd climate regarding racial abuse and aggressive barracking in general seems to require a combination of education and penalties. The AFL typically combines the two approaches with players found guilty of racial abuse not only being fined but also being required to undergo training programs in racial awareness. The same types of programs have been offered to spectators who have been found to have called out racially abusive comments.

Perhaps the most effective form of education is the sort that widespread media debate surrounding these incidents achieves. The media has a large capacity both to inform and provoke discussion. Education programs directed at a racially abusive supporter reaches one person, debating the issue within the media reaches millions and also has the advantage of allowing different views on the issue to be aired. This appears to be important as reader comments in the print media and comments on social media reveal a rejection among some spectators of attempts by clubs and others to moderate fan behaviour. Attempts to enforce racial tolerance or argue for it are commonly seen as either administrative over-reach or politically correct preaching.

Given this, it appears that neither penalties nor education will completely remove the problem. Ultimately crowd behaviour is a reflection of community attitudes and it will take a change in these attitudes to eradicate racism from among fans. In the meantime the AFL has distinguished itself as a world leader in attempts to reduce racism in sport. It is interesting to note that under Australia's anti-discrimination laws the public utterance of racially abusive comments likely to give offence is against the law. The measure of whether a particular comment is offensive is whether a reasonable member of the minority group being abused would find it offensive. Therefore spectator claims that they did not intend to make racist comments are not relevant under Australian law as the judgement is made by the person against whom the comment is directed. What is also worthy of note is that though it is against the law to make racially offensive comments there are no penalties attached. The purpose of the law appears to be largely educative.

Newspaper items used in the compilation of this issue outline

All newspaper items used in this particular outline are in the Internet Information / Web Links and Documents section.

