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NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON RACISM IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

MURDOCH UNIVERSITY

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THE COLOUR OF FOOTBALL

I would like to acknowledge the Nyoongar peoples of Western Australia the traditional owners of this land on which this meeting is taking place.

Grateful also to the organising committee of the NCRGC conference to allow me to share with you all today a very personal story about racism, a collection of my personal views.

These are the recollections of a young boy growing up, in a minority culture, who was lucky enough to have the sporting genes, simply that.

I believe that I am the first Afro – American, that is the first to have a black American father, to have played professional football in England.

If that premise is correct then we go further. The first Afro American to play in the English First Division.

The pinnacle of football. The very top

The first in anything in a world that is constantly changing.

There is a certain elation about this and I do I feel some pride?

Absolutely.

My father Clarence Sims was a black American soldier serving in the American Army during World War 2 and stationed in Bristol, England, the city of my birth.

My mother Evelyn Mary Stacey was white.

I call her Eve.

This was far, far, from the usual union of two people contemplating having a child at that particular time.

Today commonplace.

At the time of my birth. Different, unusual, frowned upon.

The American Army refused them permission to marry.

In all my 60 odd years I only managed six weeks with Clarence. This was my first experience of racism on a grand scale.

When people talk of dispossession and the lost generations, we often fail to recognise the 'niche' markets created long ago and sadly fading from living memory.

The culprits.

In particular, the American Armed forces, with the sad backing of American political leaders, and the acceptance of a large body of the American public.

Lets start with what my mother had told me, and what I learned when I tried to understand Clarence's background, this was the world that my father grew up in, and that which I too contemplated while growing up.

Ironically Bristol in England where I was born and grew up, where Clarence and Eve, my mother met, was a major player along with London and Liverpool, in the filthy business of dealing in human beings. It was a slave port.

It was also the first port of call for black American soldiers arriving in the UK.

I often wonder whether the irony was considered.

The City was overflowing with American GI s black and white.

One needs to remember that these were the days when segregation between the races in the United States was really alive and kicking, and that the American military was very highly segregated.

They had separate off duty clubs, a black soldier was shot dead in a racially motivated incident, a local girl was arrested as she defended a black soldier from an attack by a MP, and hundreds of soldiers clashed over ‘ownership’ of a local watering hole.

The ultimate form of punishment, (American servicemen were subject to the American judicial system,) was death by hanging and the sentencing rates, were highly disproportionate to the 10;1 ratio of white / black service men.

The major problem.

For many white soldiers, openly seeing the general acceptance by the public, particularly by the British women, of their black “comrades” in arms was foreign and unsettling.

To bring this segregation into focus.

- The American Red Cross refused to accept black blood, on the grounds that white soldiers would refuse, if they knew that the blood came from a Negro.

After all of this the army chose of all people a sportsman, Joe Louis ex heavyweight world champion boxer to visit the black troops on a PR tour, to boost morale.

The Americans had imported their prejudices, their colour bar and their segregation policies with them, a cynical expose of racism if ever there was, and the British Government, if not quite expressing any concerns chose to look the other way.

In the main the black troops performed ordinary tasks, like driving trucks and unloading ships.

- The American military, with one notable exception seemed to think that black troops would not be reliable as combat forces, or perhaps that mass weapons training would pose a threat to American civil life post war.
- The exception is the American 92nd Infantry Division, white officers and black infantrymen, that fought in Italy during 1944, and suffered thousands of casualties.
- In later years, the coming of wisdom or guilt, a study was commissioned to determine if any 'racial disparity' existed in the awarding of America's highest military award The Medal of Honor.
- Seven recommendations were endorsed, and only one veteran, Vernon J Baker from the 92nd, was alive to accept from the then President Bill Clinton his Medal of Honor at a ceremony on 13th January

1997, 52 years after this young man had placed his life on the line for his country.

- The cynical elevation of black troops to other combat units just prior to the end of the war was a move by Roosevelt to secure the black vote prior to the upcoming American presidential election.
- At wars end black soldiers were denied the chance to march in Victory parades.
- And in 1948 President Truman finally signed Executive Order 9981, thus ending racial segregation in the armed forces of the United States.

As I grew my mother told me that Clarence was from Scooba Mississippi, deep, deep, south redneck country. I visited the place years later, went to the spot where the young civil rights workers were murdered by the clan in the 60's, "Mississippi Burning", a chilling haunting place. Saw the black run down cemetery, where my grand parents were buried, overgrown, church falling down and the drive in need of repair.

On the other side of town, not adjacent to the black cemetery, on the other side of town stood the white cemetery, immaculate, green, fertilised manicured lawns. Even in death it seems equality passes us by.

The unanswered question, what do I make of the American Army decision to deny two people the right to marry?

As was common then my fathers unit, black soldiers and non coms, were led by white American Officers.

Lt Schumaker went by the book. Sorry Army policy. Estimates say perhaps 200,000 white British and other European GI brides made the trip back to the states during and after wars end.

Evelyn wasn't one of them. Neither to my knowledge was any white women who had a child by a black American soldier, about 150 in the Bristol area alone.

Ummm. Where were you born son.

Don't rightly know sir.

Ok sign here.

Where am I going.

To fight for your country son.

And don't forget. If you fall in love with a white girl you can't marry her .

Why's that sir.

Cause the army says so.

Here's your rifle.

Another thing before you go. When you get home, if you get home, they won't serve you coffee in the corner store, or let you go to College, don't let any red necks catch you cause they may hang or otherwise dispose of you.

Well what am I fighting for?

That's a good question.

The dilemma for my mother.

The future with a black man that she loved and more importantly where would she love him.

In racist America? Perhaps the thought of leaving her own comfort zone swayed her.

Remembering always that in some American states the union of black and white by law was illegal. The very act of consorting with a white woman, never mind having her pregnant was akin to signing your own death warrant. And Clarence. In Mississippi Clarence would be swinging from a tree.

So the jury is out.

And on the street

In the early days before football, after the war had ended and Clarence had left, he would send gifts from America. Chewing gum, salted peanuts and a beautiful fan made of delicate paper.

The postman would arrive. The kids would knock on the door. The chewing gum would run out. Nobody knocked for a while.

The 'Baby Boomers' played football in the streets of Bristol. Sometimes 20 or 30 a side kicking hell out of each other on a tarmac road under a gaslight.

At first, apprehension, the boy who lived at 58 was different. A darkie, blackie, nigger even. This must have come from the parents.

Then my very first realisation of how sport transcends race, came early in life.

I was simply the best football player in the neighbourhood, and I knew it, and so did my friends and companions.

I was appointed captain of the street team. The captains were the two best players in the neighbourhood. This was a significant event.

The appointment of someone as captain bestowed untold responsibility and decision making.

Imagine. 20/30 white kids running around playing football. One little black man.

Weighty decisions.

What time the game would begin and end. Who would play in what positions, and significantly, which heroes place would you take on the tarmac.

The game would not start unless the two captains were present and I was one of them.

I sometimes watched from the front room window as 20/30 kids mooched around in the street after my mother had told them that Steve would be out in a minute he's just finishing his tea!

And at Primary School.

Mr Burridge was a stern ex army class teacher.

Not a man to be trifled with.

As the most prominent sports person I was appointed the judge as to whether the playground was fit for our PE lessons after a bucketful of English rain.

I pressed the margins. We always played sport.

Hero status amongst peers.

At Grammar School.

Captain of the football and cricket teams.

Anxious anticipation as Friday morning tea break approached and the tiny foyer was crowded with young men, anxious to show their strength on the playing fields of England, waiting as the captain pinned the team for the weekend matches, on the notice board.

Bribery and corruption raised its head.

Steve have you finished your maths homework yet.....?

The whole scene had changed from 'we don't play with darkies' to hurry up Steve we can't start without you!

Power. Final decisions. Respect.

As a professional footballer.

The most prominent of the black players was probably Albert Johanneson a South African who played for Leeds United at outside left, and was the first black player to figure in an English FA Cup final.

His life in South Africa, at the height of the apartheid era where football was the black mans sport, and rugby belonged to the whites, had left him a little shy and apprehensive of himself in front of white folks.

As the legend permeated the football network, so the story goes when Albert seemed a little unsure of getting in the bath with all these white players, the lads got up and threw him in.

What I do know is this.

Good enough to pull on a jersey, to represent the club good enough to get in the bath with us. When you represent the club all you do is under the microscope. Your life belongs to your contract. You disgrace

yourself, you disgrace the club, most importantly you disgrace the playing group.

Fellow professionals. Ability on the football field negates colour. Believe you me. If you walk into a football club and the colour of your skin is a rainbow, you ask for a game, you can play, and you meet the standard you're in. Good enough to play professional football, is the criteria, the only criteria.

They are your friends, those close personal relationships that cannot be had with anyone else. No matter who your friends are you can't create the intimacy, perhaps the brutality, of that late sliding tackle that saved the game in front of 3,000 or 30,000 up close personal and frenzied fans on a cold wet February afternoon.

Moments shared on and off the field, that meld into one. Those personal, human issues that transcend race, age and gender.

Your personal life does not belong to you anymore. It belongs to the manager, the coach and the board. So do the good things you do. Whatever it is, that was good, very good, brilliant, magnificent, exemplary, extraordinary, or has never been done before.... was a product of club policies, youth development, training, coaching or the coach, and or marketing. If it hadn't been you, it would have been someone else.

Live in this world.

It's different, it's sport, it cannot be replicated anywhere else on any factory floor or any office.

Professional sports people in my experience don't care whether you are blue, black, white or red.

They care mostly about your ability to deliver on your skill level under the most trying of circumstances. I can tell you right now that when you're sat in that dressing room the only thing that you worry about is how your afternoon is going to pan out.

It's a credit to my fellow professionals that while I was playing I do not recall any incident of racial abuse levelled against myself. Two incidents, which I won't dwell on here, but in retrospect they could have happened to anyone.

If you're on the minority side then you're starting with a bucket of good will, people respect your ability, it's up to you whether they respect you as a person.

In 1948 the mass immigration from the Caribbean to the UK began.

What also began was a new era in British football.

The transition of black athletic achievement is startling.

Viv Anderson became the first black player to represent England at Wembley on 29th November 1978.

Paul Ince became the first black player to captain England in a full international on the 9th June 1993.

Back in April of that year Ugo Ehiogu, had captained the English under 21 side.

There are currently some 50 odd black players who hold the distinction of having pulled on the England shirt.

A survey undertaken within Premier and Football League clubs in the 1999 / 2000 season suggested that 13% of players at Premier League and Football League clubs were black.

All this in 45 short years.

This is a powerful message.

Consider how the views of many people have changed over the years.

A black man playing for England, shades of Enoch Powell.

A black man captaining the last bastion of the Empire?

What would the research tell us?

How do people feel about a black man captaining the country that invented the world game?

If attitudes and values and perceptions are changing, are they changing for the better?

Is it all about sport or are there other considerations?

We are talking massive exposure, 240 million people in 200 countries play football, understand and know that the captain of your country is a minority black player.

Or is it all too simplistic and irrelevant?

It leads one to ponder the value of sport as a tool leading to social integration.

One rarely considers distinguishing players on racial or ethnic lines when discussing sports clubs.

We don't refer to the white part of the Eagles, Dockers or Arsenal or Liverpool, or the catholic or protestant bits of clubs.

We don't leave the 'ethnics' out when the club plays golf or tennis, or hosts the awards night or dines at the finest restaurants, or meets the pollies.

We talk about the club and everyone, regardless of race, colour, religion or social status is included.

Does South Africa care that half the Rugby World Cup winning team is black?

Or does South Africa care that half the Rugby World Cup winning team is white?

Would the world view Indigenous issues in Australia differently, if AFL was a world game.

If the Australian team was captained by an Indigenous player. What pride would one feel if a black man led Australia onto a world stage.

Regrettably we wont know for a while. AFL is insular, and we have not yet developed real opportunities, in my opinion, across sport in a global context for Indigenous Australians to participate.

Our Indigenous community languishes at the lower end of the statistics of education, health, justice and other social issues, with never an upward trend in sight.

If sport is a part of the road out, keeps people healthy, gets kids to stay at school longer, keeps kids off the streets, and out of jail, then lets broaden the road, turn it into a six lane freeway.

The most telling stat is that an Indigenous child born today can expect to live about 16 years LESS than a mainstream child.

Think of your first childhood memory....think of the day you graduated from high school.....and in between.....that's a lifetime less than your little black mate sitting next to you.

Most of us would agree that the most pressing issue for our brethren are land rights, and that a close second, in order to achieve economic independence, is that the education of the next generation is critical.

If we can close that gap, encourage education and economic independence, then we open up a whole new vista of possibilities.

But a warning here. To effect the best outcomes there needs to be cross agency approach.

This in my view is not just a sports issue. It involves the portfolios of health, education, justice and Indigenous affairs.

There needs to be a collective, collaborative, approach to move this issue on. The social issues here need to run in tandem with the genes, and the sporting opportunities.

In my role as the Executive Officer of the Nyoongar Sports Association our job is to deliver on sporting opportunities and activities for Indigenous Australians in that area of the SW of the state known as 'Nyoongar Country'. It's a land mass about the same size as the UK or Italy.

This scopes the size of the job before us.

Can sport make any difference?

The federal government has contributed \$19 million over the next 3/4 years into an initiative known as 'Clontarf'. Basically this initiative uses sport, in this case Australian Rules, as a hook to maintain education attendance at schools through sport.

It's apparently very successful.

Think of it this way:

- 16 AFL clubs have a playing list of 30 players each; in all 480 players.
- That's 0.0023% of Australia's 21,000,000 population.
- 0.04% of Western Australia's population.

In Nyoongar terms:

- Estimate 30,000 people.
- From the Eagle and Dockers list of 60 the chance of making it to the top is 0.02%.
- From a state population of 1,200,000 the chances are 0.005%.
- An awful lot of kids aren't going to make it.
- An awful lot of kids are going to be very disappointed.
- Very few women play AFL.

Does this disappointment translate into negative social behaviour?

The answer surely must be that if Clontarf is so successful, and the federal government has backed the concept with \$19 million, then surely it must be incumbent to broaden the scope of participation through a multitude of sports that are played on a global basis to Indigenous Australians, of both genders, and across the age groupings.

Football in Holland, Basketball in Italy, Rugby in France will make the history of Indigenous sport all the richer.

Male dominated AFL is limited in its scope as a player on the world stage. Any Indigenous success is limited or confined to Australia, sometimes to Australian cities. If you fail to make the cut in Australia, you can't go and try your luck in Hong Kong, Paris or Montreal. What about the girls?

We don't need to be duped into believing that we should limit our thinking to Australia, let's think big, lets think world sports, lets be focused about having an Indigenous Australian captain our football (soccer) team our hockey team or our basketball team, remembering always that in these sports, Australia competes at an international level with male and female squads.

Where are our golfers, squash players and tennis players?

Let's get serious about unearthing the raw Indigenous talent that exists in Australia, taking this raw material

and transforming it into successful local, domestic, national and international talent.

Where are the holes in the development process that make this happen.

Are we placing too much emphasis on elitism, what about club level, weekend hockey or soccer.

If sport is the precursor to social integration, and my experience tells me that it is, and if sport forces people to judge you on your ability, your worth to the country, the state, local community or school team, and not your colour, culture, religion, accent or gender, then we need to move to expand the participation of Indigenous Australians across the spectrum of world sports, and dismantle the barriers to participation whatever or wherever they may be.

If, if we are to be proud of our black athletes, let's educate the next generation, and clearly plan for the day when an Indigenous Australian male or female, leads an Australian team in any form of sport on the world stage.

This in my humble opinion would change the way that future generations view Indigenous Australians.

Is this the way forward?

That's the journey that the Nyoongar Sports Association has embarked on.

I trust that there has been a little of value in what I have shared with you today, thank you for having me.

