

Casual racism in AFL no joke, new book finds

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On-field racial vilification has all but been eliminated in the AFL, but casual racism lingers, a new book claims. And Indigenous footballers still are peripheral figures at most clubs.

The *Biggest Game in Town*: an analysis of the AFL's vilification policy cites as an example a remark by ABC commentator Mark Maclure that Indigenous players at Carlton "ran like they've stolen something". This comment was presented to around 400 players and coaches at nine clubs for their reaction.

"Some said, 'that's racist and offensive'," said the book's co-author Dean Lusher, from Swinburne University. "But others said, 'It's a storm in a teacup, it's just a joke, mate'.

"Those sorts of nuances aren't as well understood by players as they could be. But if you call a player by a name on the field, everyone knows that's wrong," Lusher said.

One of the questions the book contemplates is whether footballers think it is wrong intuitively, or because there are stringent laws against it. Though education is now comprehensive, "does it change their behaviours - they still believe these things but know they can't say them - or does it fundamentally change how they view the world?" asks Lusher.

The book, to be launched on Wednesday, is written by Lusher, an associate professor at Swinburne, and Sean Gorman, from Curtin University in WA, who wrote a widely acclaimed doctoral thesis on the Krakouer brothers. The book examines the racism, homophobia and attitudes to women within AFL culture.

It is 21 years since Michael Long made his famous stance against an instance of racism in an Anzac Day match, prompting the AFL to frame ground-breaking rules and policies to deal with racial vilification.

The gains made by the AFL in the past two decades are acknowledged. "The AFL are doing well, but it's not a problem that's solved and a box that can be ticked," said Lusher. "There are some players who just don't get the nuances at all."

Gorman said the AFL had to make sure that its responses to racism were both institutional and personal. As when it changed a rule on the field, it needed to circularise everyone in the game about what constituted casual racism, with examples.

"There are many versions of what is racism," said Gorman. "At the end of the day, it is about making the people of 'difference' comfortable and included. Stopping jokes is a key to that, because we need to ask ourselves, 'What are we laughing at?'"

Lusher and Gorman found Indigenous players were liable to feel more marginalised at their clubs than non-Indigenous teammates. "We asked who were the people who set the culture in the club," said Lusher. "Players were able to nominate one another.

In only one of nine clubs was an Indigenous player named. Maybe the voices of Indigenous players need to be heard a little more within clubs."

Moreover, the authors uncovered a lack of understanding of ideas of reconciliation and multiculturalism that was surprising, given the AFL's emphasis on these. "The AFL has major themed rounds based on reconciliation and multiculturalism, so we thought the answers related to these concepts would be better articulated," Lusher said.

The Biggest Game in Town is to be launched on Wednesday at Federation Square.