

Family seeks change after racial incident in local football

By Peter Ryan
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The mother of a junior football player who made an official complaint after her son was racially abused by an opponent on the field has questioned whether local leagues are capable of dealing with such incidents.

The incident in the Yarra Junior Football League, which oversees competitions involving 11,000 male and female junior players, has prompted an Indigenous leader and a researcher to say that on-field racial vilification still happens frequently in junior sport despite the problem being stamped out at AFL level.

The boy's family are disappointed that an investigation into racial vilification did not lead to a tribunal hearing.

A teammate of the victim said he heard an opponent use a derogatory term related to the boy's race, but the boy accused of making the comment later said he had intended to remark on the boy's athletic ability.

The boy's mother and stepfather unsuccessfully requested his opponent be removed from the ground on the day, then asked that the matter go to a formal process under the league's rules on racial vilification after the two Melbourne clubs involved had attempted to deal with the matter informally.

The boy's family were disappointed that an investigation did not lead to a tribunal hearing.

"We do not want [the other boy] or his parents to experience undue stress," his mother wrote in a letter to her son's club.

"We are not seeking any penalty other than a one-match suspension to demonstrate the seriousness of the prohibited conduct and the breach of the code of conduct."

The Age has chosen not to name the clubs or the family because of the age of the boys involved.

The incident raises questions about the ability of local leagues, which are mainly managed by community volunteers, to deal with racial abuse complaints, particularly where the facts are contested.

It is the latest in a series of episodes where players have been dissatisfied with a local league's handling of a racial vilification incident after Bundoora's Kain Proctor was allegedly abused in a senior match.

AFL Victoria acknowledged that the systems to deal with such incidents need to be reviewed and that local administrators need support to handle what are often complex and emotional matters.

AFL Victoria, which doesn't have jurisdiction over metropolitan local leagues, could not force the YJFL to take the matter to the tribunal. Senior officials from the AFL and AFL Victoria did, however, meet with the family of the victim to reassure him that his courage in pursuing the matter would lead to change.

Alan Thorpe, an Indigenous leader who played for Sydney and the Western Bulldogs in the 1990s and has been involved in local football for most of his life, said processes to deal with racial abuse must improve.

"The person who has been victimised are often the ones who are made to feel like they are to blame. It's sad. People should feel supported and listened to and heard when they experience vilification," Thorpe said.

"I am not into shaming anyone but there has to be consequences for vilification and a solution to fixing the issue. We have to send a message to the wider community. We have got to address it at different levels and work together on the issue. We have got to go on that journey together."

Karen Farquharson, professor of sociology at Melbourne University, conducted research in 2019 that found the reporting process was cumbersome.

"Racial vilification in junior sport happens frequently and across all different sports," Farquharson said.

She said the processes discourage most people from taking action or calling it out because it rarely leads to a positive outcome. This is despite research showing on-field racial vilification between players and officials has been eliminated from AFL matches.

"The AFL have managed to stamp out racism on the field in professional sport. It has been very effective but that is because it is a workplace and that is because they can actually police it," Farquharson said,

"In junior sport where it is all run by volunteers it's much more difficult."

An AFL Victoria spokesman said last Friday they had been working with the Yarra Junior Football League to address the issue, and had reached out to the family of the victim to hear their perspective.

“The AFL is in the process of reviewing our national discrimination and vilification policy and we’re committed to working with leagues to ensure that all policies and processes effectively, credibly and efficiently address any allegations at all levels of the game, ” the spokesman said.

“We have been working with the Yarra Junior Football League, with the local league referring the matter to the AFL and asking for assistance in supporting those involved.

“We will continue to work with the league to provide any support required to ensure policies and processes are capable of effectively addressing any allegations when implemented.”

The family told *The Age* they appreciated AFL Victoria’s efforts but it was clear the way local leagues tried to deal with racial vilification fell short of the AFL and AFL Victoria’s values.

“It’s not the immediate [result] we wanted but if [by highlighting our experience] we are contributing to change, then good,” the boy’s mother said.

Representatives of the Yarra Junior Football League referred *The Age* to AFL Victoria when contacted about the incident last week.