

JUST BECAUSE



Advocate
explains the world

Leagues lifting self-esteem of our indigenous people

BEFORE the pre-season starts proper and young men disgrace themselves in all manner of ways – following on from the work done on Mad Monday in 2010 I would like to make the case that football really can make the world a better place.

Our eyes often glaze over when we read statistics involving the over-representation of Aboriginal people in prison, in hospital, in the unemployment line, in graves ... way too early.

One area that represents a ray of hope is on the football field.

In the National Rugby League 12.5% of players have indigenous heritage and in the AFL the figure is about 11%. Not bad when you consider only 2.5% of the population claim indigenous heritage.

And they don't just make up the numbers.

The skill, the speed, the footwork, the awareness of other players is something that many indigenous players bring as a gift to their particular footy code. In union it is the Ella brothers of the past and Kurtley Beale of the present.

In Australian Rules it is Michael Long from the past and his countryman Cyril Rioli from the present.

Players like Buddy Franklin and Liam Jarrah bring an excitement to the game each time they strap on the boots.

In league we have plenty to celebrate from our own backyard. On the big stage we have Artie



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PICTURE: MARTIN PHILBEY

Beetson from the past and players like Jonathan Thurston in the present.

On the local stage in the past we have had players like Tom and Robert Clevin and Dick Rose. Today we have Robert Woodbridge, Wes Murray, Cory and Daniel Blades. Many of these local names were on show last weekend when more than 2500 people gathered for the annual indigenous rugby league knock-out carnival.

With all this talent on show it is

somehow fitting that one of the first official football events of the year celebrates the contribution of the first Australians.

This Friday night the Indigenous Dream Team takes on the Richmond football club in Alice Springs.

On February 23, the eve of the anniversary of the Federal Government's Apology to the Stolen Generations, an indigenous All Stars team takes on an NRL All Stars team on the Gold Coast.

The game celebrates Australia's indigenous heritage while promoting the message, "Learn, Earn Legend".

Another initiative which uses football as a vehicle to promote education is the Clontarf Foundation based in Northern and Western Australia.

This wonderful program targets young indigenous boys and harnesses their passion for the game with the need to learn.

Academies led by talented young role models are dotted throughout outback Australia.

Boys need to attend school, get their assignments in on time and work in class to be a part of the team.

This is the big goal – what happens on the footy park comes second to education.

It is easy to highlight regular AFL players like Leroy Jetta, Paddy Rider or Mark Williams who are all Clontarf products, but the real reason for celebration is the number of young men who have had a solid education and are now in full-time employment.

Indigenous footballers have succeeded because of their rare and freakish talent, but also because the footy field is one of the rare places where they can compete as equals.

Imagine the day when we can celebrate indigenous scientists, writers, doctors, builders and lawyers.

Then football will really have helped to make the world a better place.