

As you enter Pat Marsh's house in North Toowoomba the first thing you notice is a devotion to cricket. Almost every room has some media focused on what happens as each ball is bowled on the distant island state of Tasmania. And as you take a seat in Pat's lounge room the groaning cabinets full of trophies and walls adorned with photographs and posters again tell you that cricket has always been big in this house. But something is a little different. The faces in many of the photographs and posters are not white as you might expect – they are black – and not West Indian either – they are images of Aboriginal cricketers.

For many years this humble address has nurtured some of Toowoomba's, Queensland and indeed Australia's finest Aboriginal cricketers. At the age of 18 Pat's son Joe toured England with the Australian Aboriginal cricket team. He received the coveted baggy green cap and with a batting average of 47.1 was the player of the series. The tour was of course remembering the very first Australian cricket team to play England in 1868 – it was all Aboriginal. For many years Pat's grandson Keith Charles terrorised Toowoomba A Grade cricketers with his fast bowling. Keith will be making a return to the Imparja cup representing Queensland in Alice Springs this February. Another grandson Kieran Gibbs has captained and played for the Queensland Imparja Cup team on a number of occasions. Pat's son Aaron could have been anything in cricket but fell to a back injury in his mid teens. One of his daughters Denise also played for Queensland in indoor and outdoor cricket.

When Matthew Hayden retired from International cricket he committed himself to working towards uncovering an Aboriginal test player. People like Joe Marsh and others in Queensland cricket have been on this quest for many years. Why our country has been unable to dip into such a wonderful talent pool remains a mystery. In a few weeks time sports fans of Australia will focus on the first NRL All Stars vs Indigenous Dream Time game at the Gold Coast. Eleven percent of the NRL have Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage. And the fans love them. Not because they are Indigenous, not because they are good role models but because they are unbelievable and exciting athletes. Players like Hodges, Thurston, Thaiday, Campbell, Prince, Inglis, Soward – I rest my case.

So when I ask Pat Marsh why we can't get Aboriginal cricketers into our elite cricket team he comes up with a few answers. I think this humble man with more than seventy grand children and a life spent watching, playing and nurturing cricket is on the money when he states, "It is still seen very much as a white man's game". Mr Marsh reckons we need to start early with the Murri kids – maybe even before they get a football into their hands! At the structural level Queensland Cricket is leading the way with an Indigenous development squad and support for the Imparja Team. And Matty Hayden is doing his bit too – but unless things change in schoolboy and club cricket it will be a long long road until we get an Aboriginal player in a test team.

Cricket Clubs must look at ways of attracting and keeping Aboriginal youth involved. They may need to think outside the box. Years ago I heard of a Cricket Masala carnival in Sydney. It was a festival of food and fun designed to celebrate Australian cricketers

from a sub continental background. Surely we can come up with something for the descendants of the First Australians. It won't just make Aboriginal people stronger – it will make Australian cricket stronger. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> February a six week Indigenous in2cricket programme will start at the Harlaxton oval. This fantastic course is designed to give youngsters a taste of the game of cricket. Let's hope that this builds on the wonderful work done by a man who first played A Grade cricket for Horse Shoe Creek (near Kyogle) many years ago.