The origins of Aboriginal Football Skills

The natural prowess of Aboriginal footballers has long been a spectacle for those admirers of the game who often marvel at the extraordinary skills and agility of players such as the Krakour brothers, Syd Jackson, Polly Farmer, Nicky Winmar and Maurice Rioli just to name a select few.

It is largely because of these skills which are often described as a form of ‘black magic’ that Aboriginal players find themselves under increasing pressure from opposition players. The use of racist remarks by players and spectators as a way of perhaps trying to nullify the effectiveness of Aboriginal players is commonplace in Australia’s national football game. Indeed it would be fair to say that all Aboriginal footballers, whether it be at the league or local level, have experienced racist slurs and behaviour of one form or another, both on and off the field.

Why Aboriginal people are so good at this game is an obvious question that arises when discussing this subject. And why have they made such a significant contribution to our national game when one considers that Aborigines only form just over 1% of the total population? To explore these issues in more depth and to provide some insight into the reasons for the dominance of Aboriginal footballers one needs to look at the roots of Australian Rules Football.

The following discussion was written by Jim Poulter who has delved into this subject and come up with some rather startling evidence.

Poulter discusses the origins of Australian Rules Football in his paper "MARN-GROOK - Original Aussie Rules", (1985) by saying that until the present time, it has been a conventional belief that our national football game was of an exclusively European origin; the only debate being on the respective influences of Gaelic football, soccer and rugby.

However, recent research has brought to light previously unsuspected links to a game of tribal football played for countless thousands of years by Aboriginal Australians. Observations of this game by early colonists predate the development of our national game by many decades, and indicate the tribal game was played virtually throughout Australia. References to the tribal game to date, have been located in Victoria, South Australia, the Riverina area of New South Wales and the Carpentaria basin area of Queensland and the Northern Territory.

Along with a number of other distinctively Aboriginal sports, this tribal game was most often played at the great meetings. Such meetings were usually of two forms. First, the tribal gatherings which occurred every couple of years with attendances numbering hundreds; or second the nationwide gatherings which occurred every 8 to 10 years, and could number in the thousands.

The last of the nationwide gatherings to occur in the Melbourne area was in February 1852, when the people of the Wurrundjeri (Melbourne), Bunurong (Westernport), Barabool (Geelong), Braukaulong (Gippsland) and Taungurong (Goulburn) tribes gathered at Warrandyte. Coincidentally, this is where gold had been discovered first in Victoria eight months before. The area was thus inhabited by many Irish, Scottish and English gold panners and miners, who witnessed the corroboree activities that lasted for two weeks.

There is little doubt that native football was one of these activities, the distinctive feature of the game being the way natives would leap higher in the air over each oth-
In the book 'Aborigines of Victoria' by R. Borough-Smyth in 1873, the author recounted a description of this tribal football which had been documented by the Aboriginal Protector, Mr Thomas, probably in the 1840s.

The Marn-Grook, or game of ball, for instance is thus described by the late Mr Thomas:

'The men and boys joyfully assemble when this game is to be played. One makes a ball of possum skin, or the like, of good size, somewhat elastic, but firm and strong, it is given to the foremost player or to someone of mark who is chosen to commence the game. He does not throw it as a white man might do, but drops it and at the same time kicks it with his foot, using the instep for the purpose. It is thrown high into the air, and there is a rush to secure it — such a rush as is seen commonly at football matches amongst our own people. The tallest men, and those who are able to spring to a great height, have the best chances in this game. Some of them will leap as high as five feet or more from the ground to catch the ball. The person who secures the ball kicks it again, and again a scramble ensues. This continues for hours and the natives never seem to tire of the exercise.'

A further account from the 1840s is contained in the book, 'Australian Aborigines' by James Dawson published in 1881, as follows:

'One of the favourite games is football, in which fifty, or as many as one hundred players engage at a time. The ball is about the size of an orange, and is made of possum skin, with the fur side outwards. It is filled with pounded charcoal, which gives solidity without much increase in weight, and is tied hard around with kangaroo sinews. The players are divided into two sides and ranged in opposing lines, which are always of a different "class" — white cockatoo against black cockatoo, quail against snake, etc. Each side endeavours to keep possession of the ball, which is tossed a short distance by hand, and then kicked in any direction. The side which kicks it oftenest and furthest gains the game. The person who sends it highest is considered the best player, and has the honour of burying it in the ground until required the next day.

The sport is concluded with a shout of applause, and the best player is complimented on his skill. This game, which is somewhat similar to the white man's game of football, is very rough; but as the players are barefooted and naked, they do not hurt each other so much as the white people do; nor is the fact of an Aborigine being a good football player considered to entitle him to assist in making laws for the tribe to which he belongs.'

As is indicated above, the football was commonly made of possum skin, but often children would play a version of 'kick to kick' where the ball — a kangaroo bladder — was kicked straight up and they competed to catch the ball. Sometimes, however, this type of ball was used in the adult game as was observed in the Gippsland areas and reported by Brough-Smyth.

The Rev. M. Bulmer gives the following information respecting the games of the natives of Victoria. He says, 'The ball with which they play is named Dirk. The material of which it is made is suggested by the name. It is part of the organs of an "old man" kangaroo, blown out. The game is played by the ball being thrown, or kicked up with the foot. Whoever catches the ball oftener, wins the game.'

Because early colonists often had very little understanding in regard to the totemic symbols of Aboriginal culture, their appreciation of the rules of the game was limited. However people like James Dawson were an exception and his writings have indicated some understandings.

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Throughout Australia, Aboriginal tribes divide all things living or not, into two opposing but complementary halves which are given the term moiety. Commonly these halves or moieties are symbolised by Black Cockatoo and White Cockatoo, or sometimes by Eagle and Crow. Commonly, every person is born into the moiety of their father and therefore has a special relationship with each animal or object belonging to that moiety. Within each of these moieties there is usually two 'skin' groups. This total of four skin groups are usually symbolised by two types of animal, say birds and reptiles, so that Black Cockatoo for instance consists of two skin groups' Python and Quail with White Cockatoo consisting of Pelican and Tiger Snake skin groups. This is in fact thought to be the skin and moiety totems of the Gunditjmara tribe of the western district of Victoria.