

Lessons from Down Under: Honoring the history of the land

ONE OF US JUST RETURNED from guiding a group of university students around Australia and while there, bumped into a working concept immediately capable of benefiting our North American leagues. That idea? Full recognition of the indigenous people on whose land the teams of the NFL/CFL, NBA/WNBA, NHL, MLB, MLS/NWSL, MLR, UFC, PGA Tour/LPGA, NASCAR, and IndyCar currently compete.

Discussing the idea, the other one brought up his past experiences working on a Canadian government policy tied to Aboriginal sport and the many barriers that still exist in making real progress for Aboriginal people and their involvement in organized sport.

Our chat led to this article and a fervent hope we can inspire incremental change.

To be clear (as a disclaimer), this is not an argumentative piece supporting team name changes from Redskins (now Commanders), Indians (Guardians), and Fighting Sioux (Fighting Hawks), or a debate whether others (think the Blackhawks, Seminoles, Utes, Aztecs, Chiefs, Braves and Warriors) should revisit their entrenched and supposedly well-intended positions.

Most who follow these discussions know, despite semi-frequent op-ed pieces, good intentions usually end with someone outraged. Instead, our goal today is challenging hierarchical standards and initiating overdue honoring of native North Americans by drawing on something happening in Australia, which honors past indigenous generations in celebratory ways we firmly believe could work in North America.

Want that example?

Most Australian professional sports leagues — the Australian Football League, National Rugby League, National Basketball League, Supercars Championship — designate one week of the season as the Indigenous Round and require all of their teams to produce indigenous uniforms (or paint schemes on cars) that is commemorative, fashionable yet also

fully sincere.

As it says on the AFL's website, "The jumpers are an incredible tapestry of art, spirit, colour, and meaning." And then, the website asks if AFL fans have a favorite.

BY RICK BURTON
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What a novel approach. The concept isn't strictly about monetizing home and away merchandise (as American sports marketers would), but rather seeking artistic ways to make amends for past national bias, prejudice, and racism.

What was even more fascinating was observing how each team incorporated Aboriginal art into a unique canvas showcased on the team's guernsey (another word for jumper or team singlet). They not only honored distinct Aboriginal cultures but also celebrated the past and present.

Collingwood's artists showed a magpie shedding its old feathers to reflect the changing of an era. Essendon's effort was designed by star forward Anthony McDonald-Tipungwuti, who chose to depict a journey to a central meeting place.

One of our favorites was the Geelong Cats jumper, which was fashioned by Corrina Eccles and incorporated meaningful landmarks known throughout the Barwon region. As Eccles noted, "I wanted to

tell the story of Wadawurrung country, the story of Djilang, and take people back on a journey to what the country was like prior to how we see the built environment today. In the design I have the Kardinyoo, the sunrise taking place and the two teams coming together to play what we call Marngrook. The Barwon River is a place that our eels would travel down [and] Bunjil [watching] over this country he created, [flying] over the stadium, watching over country and the river."

Interestingly, indigenous efforts weren't restricted to the AFL. In Sydney, the Syracuse study abroad students met with an NRL team that employed an indigenous programs coordinator who runs the Cronulla Sharks Deadly Choices Program in schools. She also coordinates the NRL's Indigenous Round, the Reconciliation Action Plan, and conducts health and well-being checks with indigenous community members.

"I'll be in sport until the day I die," said Jessica Macartney, head of government and community for the Sharks, "because sport can be used as a vehicle to deliver change."

Australia should not stand alone in honoring its original inhabitants or pushing reconciliation toward First Nations people. In Canada, where the horrors of what happened at Residential Schools are coming to light and putting scars on Canada's reputation, teams and leagues should think about taking a page from the AFL or NRL.

Noticing reconciliation efforts Down Under isn't meant to suggest North American teams don't conduct

their own community outreach for various underserved or marginalized communities. But in places where the NFL, NHL, MLB, and NBA trademarks (i.e., intellectual property) are treated as sacred, it seems uniform modifications are often restricted to honoring women (Breast Cancer Awareness Month) and veterans.

With growing awareness of Black Lives Matter (and with horror still fresh in our minds from the tragedies in Buffalo and Uvalde), we know our sports practitioner ecosystem faces daily challenges to help fans look away from the realities of modern living. That said,

there is one significant community most teams and leagues seem to forget to honor and assist.

Isn't it time North American pro sports leagues and racing conglomerates recognize their stadiums are built on land with deep historical significance and, in almost every case, were constructed on sacred ground that wasn't purchased (or negotiated fairly) but instead stolen? Isn't it time to go way beyond reading a statement before executives give speeches, and instead provide uniform proof we are attempting to make amends?

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ABOVE: Members of the Cronulla Sharks rugby team in their Indigenous Round jerseys.

LEFT: Artist and historian Henry Fourmile gathers with Cairns Taipans players to discuss the significance of the design.

