The Incredible Story, And Lasting Influence, Of The Rumbalara Football Club

RICHARD COOKE 2 NOV 2020

Sport has long held a cherished place in Aussie culture. But for some teams, it's about more than what happens on the field. We look at Victoria's iconic Rumbalara Football Netball Club, its history as the spiritual home of Aussie Rules, and its continued presence as an enduring anchor for the local community.

Above: The trailblazing Cummeragunja footy team, known as the 'Invincibles'. They would win five premierships in the 1920s before being forced to withdraw from the league.

What do we think about, when we think about Aboriginal football? The enduring image (let's face it, the cliché) comes from the Outback. Bare feet on red dirt. Kids in a remote community, chasing a Lyrebird to the boundary of the desert horizon.

Strange then, that the history of Aboriginal Australian rules football, like the history of Australian rules football itself, starts such a long way inside the Barassi line. It was born in cold country, not dry country, in the river lands of regional Victoria and the New South Wales border.

It is there, in the footballing heartland of Shepparton, that a fifth generation of Indigenous footballers still takes inspiration from the first. At Rumbalara Football Netball Club they joke that when someone at the AFL has to apologise to Aboriginal people (and it's only a matter of time), they can stand and watch the plane flying overhead, bypassing them on the way to Darwin.

This oversight is a bit of a mystery to Paul Briggs, Rumba's president and founder. "It would need a PhD to unravel," he says, why 'authentic' reads as 'exotic', and how the Victorian football establishment can still, after all this time, ignore what's right under its nose. The old Victorian Football League has something to do with it – it was less open to Black players than competitions in Western and South Australia.

So, too, a brand of dispossession and cultural destruction in the surrounds of Melbourne that was more complete than elsewhere. But it's all the more perplexing when the spirit of Indigenous football that crystallises Rumbalara, is so rich and storied. So charged with characters and legends.

At the centre of this story is a team, the Cummeragunja Invincibles, that created a line of champions that has continued unbowed for more than a century.

Like so much of the history of Indigenous Australia, the story of Rumbalara begins as a story of survival. There were once thousands of Yorta Yorta people in the lands around the Murray River; in Indigenous languages, a doubled name often signifies living on both sides of a waterway.

But by the late 1800s, smallpox and raids had devastated the clan groups. Survivors congregated on Maloga Mission, where they organised games of Marn Grook, the Indigenous football played with a stuffed possum skin. They were handy cricketers as well, and were soon winning local competitions against settler teams. Australian rules football took longer to catch on. There's a theory this was because there were so few fit men left: enough for a team of 11, but perhaps not for one of 20.

Maloga's religious rules were too strict, so the group abandoned it, moving to a new site and new mission at Cummeragunja, near the town of Barmah on the New South Wales border. Cummera, as it became known, was less rigid, but its population – barely 200 – had no real authority of its own. Forbidden to speak in language or practice traditional culture, the intent was to assimilate them out of existence.

Instead, this tiny settlement survived, and in its short history incubated an astonishing number of politicians, leaders, musicians and elite sportspeople. Sir Douglas Nicholls, who gives his name to the AFL Indigenous Round, grew up at Cummera; so too, decades later, did the St Kilda player Robbie Muir. Aboriginal activist and leader Jack Patten was Cummera-born, while fellow campaigner William Cooper moved to Cummera shortly after it was established. Both of them had champion athlete sons; Patten's was a boxer, while Lynch Cooper, a sprinter, became the first Indigenous Australian to win a world sporting title.

Another Cummera runner, Bobby McDonald, invented the crouching start, half-accidently, when he took shelter from a cold, miserable wind while waiting for the starter's pistol. Despite all these stars, the defining Cummeragunja legacy came not from a single performer, but from a team, and a team spirit.

It was in 1894 that the first written invitation to play football was sent out. A letter arrived at the Bendigo Football Association, offering a footballing exhibition, alongside displays of singing, skipping and boomerang throwing. The "hand writing was excellent", the *Bendigo Advertiser* reported and the proposal created "much merriment among the delegates". So began a pattern that has repeated for more than a century.

First bemusement, then engagement, then rejection. Sometimes the story of Cummera and Rumbalara follows a loop more than a line, arriving at the same tension point. Aboriginal footballers are welcome, on two conditions: that the welcome stays on the field, and that they don't win too much. It's the second part that's always caused the most trouble.

Though raw and still learning the game in the 1890s – in their first official game they kicked a score of zero – Cummera's barefoot players displayed their skill and athleticism from the first bounce. Already, their lateral movement (that the settlers called "dodging"), along with their handballing, running and tapwork were too much for their opposition.

While settler teams tried to learn from it, they found it hard to imitate. It was a style much like modern around-the-ball AFL, displayed to men who couldn't play it and couldn't defend against it. The "merriment" was over, and in 1898 Cummera won its first premiership, undefeated. (This event was on everyone's minds a century later, when Rumbalara won the 1998 premiership.)

Paul Briggs' father, Les Briggs, was a premiership baby, born in 1897. In his toddler years, Cummera would dominate local competitions. They went undefeated again in 1899, and in 1900 thrashed Bendigo. This time, the *Bendigo Inquirer* stewed on the implications:

The Australian "natives," as the descendants of Britishers style themselves, can certainly claim to be possessed of as much intelligence as any race under the sun. Furthermore, they boast, and lightly too, that in all manly sports they can give the whole world a lead, including the mother country. And yet here in Bendigo, the

"pivot" of Australia, was to be witnessed by the sight of its best team of footballers having rings run round them (and those very literal ones) by the despised and fast dying aboriginal.

It was a sight to make the proud Britisher feel humble, or at any rate to shake his confidence in the superiority of the race.

Above: AFL icon and pioneering activist Sir Doug Nicholls with his wife, Lady Gladys Nicholls.

In the 1920s, this confidence-shaking was severe enough that Cummera had to be handicapped. A team known as the 'Invincibles' won five premierships in six years, with contests so lopsided it ate at the notion of white domination and, along with it, settler morale. In 1927, one of the Cummera team vans broke down, meaning they were forced to begin play with only nine men on the field. They won anyway.

A new rule was introduced for the league: no players over the age of 25. This was aimed squarely at the prime playing years of Cummera's star performers, and rather than pressing their welcome, the team disbanded. It was not the first time this pattern would repeat.

Les Briggs was a strong presence, a former footballer himself, and would go on to live well into his eighties. The mission's prohibitions meant a lot of traditional knowledge had been lost, but Les did know how to carve, and passed along what he knew.

He made traditional weapons – boomerangs and nulla-nullas – and his house would be full of boys watching him at work. He was already in his fifties when Paul was born, and no longer a sportsman. His lessons were grounded in character, and drawn from the Invincibles: respect, loyalty, fair play. He kept those embers aglow, and passed them along.

The Invincibles' spirit and resolve were not confined to the field. In 1939, tensions on the mission boiled over. One resident described the Yorta Yorta as living under the "bullet, the baton and the boot". They went on strike, and the Cummeragunja Walk-off became a milestone in the battle for Indigenous rights. The authorities were petitioned over land rights, an unresolved injustice that would raise the stakes on the football field for years to come. Country footy is full of grudge matches, but teams representing towns on opposite sides of a land-rights claim added genuine spite.

On Cummera, playing pick-up games as a kid, Paul Briggs had found an advantage to being left-footed. "As little fellas on Cummera, when we'd pull our scratch teams together," he remembers, "there were not enough pairs of boots to go round. Most people are rightfooted, so it meant you always got a boot."

They played with one boot each, running lopsided, but running fast. Opposition players were not then so adept at kicking with both feet, and defences were weaker in the right pocket and flank. Easier for Paul Briggs to thread through, from the centre or half-forward line.

Many of the former Cummera residents came to live in a transitional housing complex called Rumbalara. Rumbalara is not a Yorta Yorta word, and no one can remember exactly how it became attached to some transitional housing developments, built in the late 1950s after Queen Elizabeth II had visited Shepparton. Before then, dispossessed Aboriginal people had lived on the Murray flatlands, near tipsites, often in tin shanties. Rumbalara means 'at the end of the rainbow', and locals joked that the residents were all the colours of the spectrum: brown, black, off-white, dusky. Men would come and pick them up on trucks to perform work on the surrounding properties. Picking the men up to play football didn't feel so different: another form of precarious labour.

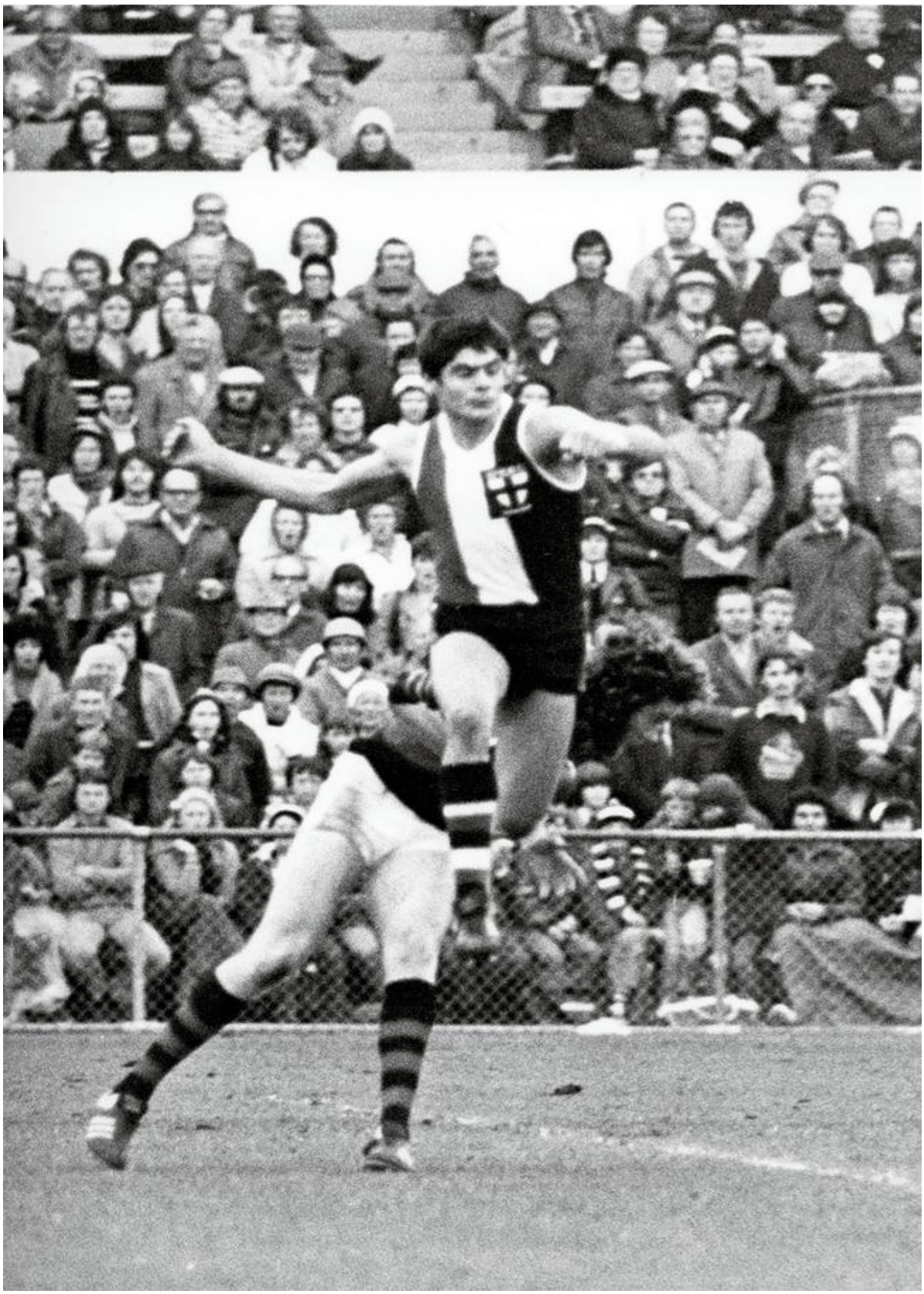
Now a country footballer of fortune, Paul Briggs could feel the similarities himself. By the 1970s, the racial tensions in the regions might have been getting worse rather than better.

The Yorta Yorta land claim gathering momentum was eventually unsuccessful, as their continuing links to the land had been erased. The amount of respect you held was roughly the same as the value you brought, and on the field, things were (mostly) OK. But off it... you wouldn't expect any dinner invitations from his teammates, let's put it that way.

In every other arena, from the pub to the post office to the police station, it was white men that held the authority. Held it and wielded it. On the oval though, skill had its own kind of authority – one that was undeniable.

The match-day money helped, and playing that way opened the door to other kinds of work as well. Otherwise, Aboriginal people could remain in a parallel universe, bound by welfare and disdain. Paul went to Melbourne with Sir Douglas Nicholls, by then an old man, who got him a job at the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs.

"Career opportunities and career aspirations were fairly limited," Paul says now. "The role modelling and modelling of careers and jobs in place in society was very, very narrow." So was the ability to find a place for yourself.



Above: St Kilda's Robbie Muir, one of the many football legends born in Cummera

There always seemed to be another set of rules for Aboriginal people, shifting and unwritten. They had to not only exceed but excel, and even then, the conditions for full acceptance and humanity were somehow incomplete. Goalposts shifted, eternally. Paul and Sir Douglas didn't talk about the latter's playing days. He did not mention being cut from Carlton when trainers refused to touch him, or the early days at Fitzroy, where his teammates would not sit near him in the changing rooms.

Paul didn't ask – you don't ask an Elder anything, uninvited – and by then, Sir Douglas was more interested in mentoring him through non-sporting means of advancement, such as education and employment. Once, when Paul turned out for a state team of Indigenous men, Sir Douglas arrived in the rooms at half-time, and told them to tone down the roughness of their play. That was 1970s football, but if they played that way, they'd be compared to animals.

Even when Paul wasn't targeted for his race, there was an ongoing opportunity to get rubbed, off the ball or on it. You had to rely on your teammates to protect you, to fight for you, and "hope that they chose loyalty to their team colours", instead of the colour of their skin. Regional hospitals got good at nose reconstructions. It was hard to retaliate, when the people you were playing might be the same people who were employing you as well. Cleaning someone up could cost you a job.

At that time, the very finest Indigenous footballers, the most athletic, the most creative, seldom went as far as they should have. It was family that seemed to make the biggest difference. Without that bedrock, the better athletes would burn themselves up, make it as far as a country or city team and then become unmoored. Many died young.

The Stolen Generation is also a generation of stolen talent. St Kilda player Robbie Muir, who had been born on Cummera Mission, was torn apart by targeted racial abuse. Muir had been mentored by Nicholls as well, but unlike the pastor, found it impossible to turn the other cheek against the taunts, spitting, bottles and blows that followed him in the VFL.

Paul earned money, and earned respect on the field, but the relationship felt transactional, and one-way. Away from the turf, the team spirit was hard to find. For others, footy meant access to relationships, friendships, ways of doing business.

For Paul and the other Aboriginal men who played alongside him, all those tracks were curtailed. He began to realise Indigenous people would need their own team. It was the only way to have something to call their own. And it would be called Rumbalara.

It took years, until 1998. The Cummuragunja Invincibles had had a league dissolve around it. The All Blacks of Daish's Paddock, too, had had a league dissolve around it. Something similar happened to Rumbalara, and not in the bad old days, but the 1990s and 2000s. First there was reluctance, hemming and hawing and excuses not to join leagues and organisations. It was more ambiguous than a simple wall of open prejudice.

Some of the hairy questions about country league composition, how far a farm family could be expected to travel on game day, for example, or what level a fresh team should be pegged at, were real. But the end result was just as crude.

It would be easy to paint that centenary premiership as a happy ending. 'Cummeragunja' was on everyone's lips that day, and if only the taste of football supremacy had come full circle, the book could be closed. Instead, Rumba's coach, Mark Atkinson, had asked several white players to join the team, but only one, Dallas Terlich, did so.

In short order, leagues would chaffe at Rumba's inclusion. In 2006, governing bodies had to step in, and compel the team's inclusion in the Murray Football League, like it or not.

And all the points against that inclusion – it wasn't good enough yet, it had an unfair advantage, it had its eyes on the Goulburn Valley comp and would cause problems for the MFL when it moved on – didn't evaporate when the club soon won a premiership. The arguments just changed. If they had silenced the critics, it was the silence of indifference, not acceptance.

Paul earned money, and earned respect on the field, but the relationship felt transactional, and one-way. Away from the turf, the team spirit was hard to find. For others, footy meant access to relationships, friendships, ways of doing business.

For Paul and the other Aboriginal men who played alongside him, all those tracks were curtailed. He began to realise Indigenous people would need their own team. It was the only way to have something to call their own. And it would be called Rumbalara.

It took years, until 1998. The Cummuragunja Invincibles had had a league dissolve around it. The All Blacks of Daish's Paddock, too, had had a league dissolve around it. Something similar happened to Rumbalara, and not in the bad old days, but the 1990s and 2000s. First there was reluctance, hemming and hawing and excuses not to join leagues and organisations. It was more ambiguous than a simple wall of open prejudice.

Some of the hairy questions about country league composition, how far a farm family could be expected to travel on game day, for example, or what level a fresh team should be pegged at, were real. But the end result was just as crude.

It would be easy to paint that centenary premiership as a happy ending. 'Cummeragunja' was on everyone's lips that day, and if only the taste of football supremacy had come full circle, the book could be closed. Instead, Rumba's coach, Mark Atkinson, had asked several white players to join the team, but only one, Dallas Terlich, did so.

In short order, leagues would chaffe at Rumba's inclusion. In 2006, governing bodies had to step in, and compel the team's inclusion in the Murray Football League, like it or not.

And all the points against that inclusion – it wasn't good enough yet, it had an unfair advantage, it had its eyes on the Goulburn Valley comp and would cause problems for the MFL when it moved on – didn't evaporate when the club soon won a premiership. The arguments just changed. If they had silenced the critics, it was the silence of indifference, not acceptance.

Above: Indigenous All Star, Nathan Lovett-Murray spent 10 years with the Essendon Bombers, before heading to Rumbalara.

"I write in disgust that football leagues such as the Goulburn Valley Football League and Murray Football League are so ashamed of the Rumbalara Football Netball Club. Why can't they be straight and say, we don't want a black club in our league'" began a letter in the Shepparton News. It was written in 2005.

That's still a problem for Rumbalara – local footy clubs need local businesses to sponsor them, and that has always been a struggle. The belief in assimilation was so widespread – how could you get people to sponsor something they thought shouldn't exist? Some AFL clubs saw it as a pathway for player development. Richmond was interested. Collingwood had chipped in money – Chris Egan had played for both Rumba and the Pies – but that could build its own resentments.

Above: The Rumbalara senior men's team celebrate winning the 1999 premiership, with a certain budding rapper (fourth from right) alongside his father, Paul Briggs.

He wasn't the only big-name player with a relationship. Nathan Lovett-Murray had gone to Rumba to help the club. He had just finished a ten-year career with the Essendon Bombers, having been selected for the Indigenous All-Stars Team on multiple occasions, the final time as captain. By then he'd played enough football, or so he thought, so he was ambivalent when Uncle Paul called.

Then when the end of the year came he felt that itch again. He knew Shepparton, and he knew country football as well. He wouldn't train with the team – the commute was too long to do twice a week – but he would keep himself fit and stay in Shepp on Friday night before match day.

Lovett-Murray found himself looking forward to it. There was a spread in any country footy club, between players who played for fun, and players who played to win, and the latter group soaked up his knowledge. When he was banned from coaching the team due to the Bombers' ASADA issues, Rumbalara ended up helping him, instead of the other way around.

He soon left, and said it was eye-opening, the contempt for Aboriginal people that could still afflict country football. The frost of the old hostility was still on the land.

Still, things were changing, in unexpected places. Rumba's netball teams had faced the same issues, but when Rumba, and other local clubs fielded a women's AFL team for the first time, it found fresh territory. Lisa Thorpe, a veteran netball player, was put in charge of the women's footy team, which found proof-of-concept quickly.

"We didn't know if anyone would play at first," she says, and there were some community concerns about how mothers would train. The team was oversubscribed, and in the Rumba way, began winning pretty much immediately.

Thorpe had encountered racism on the netball court plenty of times, yet there was something about women's Aussie rules that seemed to preclude it. Maybe it was the people it attracted: by choice, they were coming to join something, and that instilled a camaraderie that lasted long after the siren.

"Perhaps," she said, "they like the feeling of being part of something new."

For years, there was a bleak joke among Shepparton's Indigenous population that funerals were the only chance they had to meet up. Rumbalara changed that. It is closed for the time-being – the ongoing pandemic has put football on hold – which officially makes it an inessential service. But it is still a vital one. It is, in the words of its co-founder John Murray, "a place of spiritual healing"; a place where community can be anchored to a sense of pride, and a legacy of achievement.

When the High Court declared that the Yorta Yorta people had no proven continuity in their link to their land and their cultural heritage, they were perpetuating a legal lie. It is Rumbalara that continues the truth of that link – and this time, no one can take that away.

To find out more, head to rfnc.com.au.

This piece originally appeared in GQ Australia's September/October 2020 edition.