

A Case Study of Sport and Racism in Australia: A Qualitative Document Analysis

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Abstract: Australia is well known as a 'sporting nation' with outstanding elite sporting achievements and grassroots-level sports participation. The reality for Australia's First Nations people and those from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds, however, tends to differ from the mainstream Australian population. One of the contributing factors being argued within this paper is the prevalence of historical and contemporary racism in Australian sport. This study focuses on four of Australia's most popular community-participation sports, including Australian Rules Football (ARF), Cricket, Netball, and Swimming. Using a Qualitative Document Analysis method, this research investigates both primary and secondary sources for instances of both historical and contemporary racism reported in these four sports, particularly at the elite professional level. This study revealed that racism is a key factor affecting participation and performance for Australian First Nations people and those from CALD backgrounds in the sports under examination. This study contributes to a stronger understanding of the institutional racism that exists in Australian sporting contexts and the need for more inclusive practices at both the grassroots and elite levels.

Keywords: Australia; Culturally and Linguistically Diverse; First Nations; sport and physical activity; racism

Introduction

Modern Australia is internationally renowned for its elite sporting achievements and longstanding reputation as a 'sporting nation' at both grassroots and elite levels (Maniam, 2020). Similarly, Australia is widely recognized as one of the most multicultural countries in the world (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Despite these factors, the intersection of these critical features in sporting contexts often looks very different in practice. At both the grassroots community level and the elite professional level, historical and

contemporary trends indicate that Australians from both First Nations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders) and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds (non-Anglo-Celtic migrants) continue to be underrepresented in sporting contexts relative to their population size (Maniam, 2014, 2020; Mosely, 1997). Racism is considered to be a significant factor contributing to this underrepresentation of First Nations people and those from CALD backgrounds within community sports participation across the nation (Hallinan, 2015). Even though Australia's *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* formally prohibits

racial discrimination, in reality, such biases persist across contemporary Australian society. This includes workplaces, educational institutions, the healthcare sector, and in sport at all levels of competition. People from First Nations and CALD backgrounds are much more likely to experience this racism, compared to Australians from other cultural backgrounds (Rodwell, 2024). We argue that this exclusion has substantial implications beyond sport for social cohesion across the nation, disrupts of positive settlement outcomes for migrants from CALD backgrounds, and reinforces physical inactivity levels and health inequities experienced by many First Nations Australians.

In recent years, the Australian Government has created several initiatives to address racism in sport, including the National Integrity Framework (Sport Integrity Australia, 2026), the Australian Human Rights Commission *Guide to address spectator racism in sports* (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021), and *Racism. It Stops With Me* (Sport Integrity Australia, 2024). Despite these formal and public efforts to address racism in sport and across society, racism remains a key issue in Australia. Since the 20th century, Australian Rules Football (ARF), Cricket, Netball, and Swimming have consistently been among the nation's most popular community sports in terms of participation (Australian Sports Commission, 2023). By focusing on these four sports, this case study will examine historical and contemporary factors that influence participation trends among First Nations people and CALD backgrounds, alongside the issue of racism.

Literature Review

Research on the participation of First Nations peoples and those from CALD backgrounds in sports, their historical and contemporary achievements, and issues related to racism constitutes a large body of literature in Australia and other English-speaking countries such as the United States of America (USA), Canada, and New Zealand. Research on sport participation among First Nations people and CALD backgrounds in the USA, Canada, and New Zealand demonstrates relatively low levels of involvement compared to the broader population in their respective countries (Norman et al., 2022; Delsahut & Terret, 2014; Wiggins, 2014). For people

from First Nations and CALD backgrounds who are still able to participate in sport and achieve success at community, national, or international levels, the experience of racial discrimination is still known to be a persistent reality. (Nakhid & Enari, 2025; Smikle & Trussell, 2024). In circumstances where participation levels are relatively high among people from First Nations or CALD backgrounds, this is often due to the culturally significant place of these sports within their respective contexts. For example: African Americans and Basketball, New Zealand Māori and Rugby Union, and the involvement of Canada's First Nations people in Ice Hockey. Multiple researchers in countries with First Nations and growing CALD populations have highlighted that racism is a major contributor to low sports participation for these cohorts (Marquez-Velarde et al., 2023; Sandrin & Palys, 2021).

Similarly, despite Australia being viewed as a 'paradise of sport' (Cashman, 1997) and Australia's inaugural international cricket team tour to England in 1868 being composed entirely of First Nations men (Litchfield et al., 2022), First Nations peoples and those from CALD backgrounds are less likely to engage in regular sport and physical activity compared to the general population (Department of Health and Aged Care [DHAC], 2021). Without being able to participate in sport to the same extent as the broader community, many potential health and social benefits are lost. This includes assisting with settlement, building a sense of belonging, fostering cross-cultural understanding, promoting inclusion, acceptance, and friendship, and increasing self-esteem (Australian Sports Commission [ASC], 2013; Cameron et al., 2022; Young & Block, 2023). Irrespective of these known benefits, the reason for these Australian populations having lower levels of participation is often attributable to several barriers including: fear of discrimination and racism, language barriers, and limited social support (Wang et al., 2023; Young & Block, 2023), alongside mandatory uniforms that may not support cultural safety such as Schnioffsky's (2025) investigation into netball uniforms reinforcing notions of 'white femininity.' A seminal study investigating sports participation among CALD communities was conducted by Mosely (1997). This research was divided into two case studies, with the first focusing on the participation of specific CALD and First Nations communities in sporting activities, and the second on their achievements at the elite level of sport. Other Australian diaspora

groups investigated were people from Croatian, Greek, Irish, Italian, Jewish, Pacific Islander, Polish, and Vietnamese heritage. Many people within these cohorts arrived in Australia as newly arrived migrants and refugees from non-English-speaking backgrounds. The second case study focused on sports, including Soccer, Cricket, Australian Rules Football, Rugby League, Surf Lifesaving, Netball, Boxing, Softball, and Weightlifting. This case study examined connections between these Australian CALD communities and their participation in these sports, which are popular in the Australian context. Collectively, these case studies reflected embedded racism and discrimination in Australian sporting activities experienced by both First Nations people and CALD communities (Mosely, 1997). Beyond this study, other research on sport, multiculturalism, and racism in Australia has been conducted over the last two decades (Hay, 2006; Knijnik & Spaaij, 2017; Maniam, 2014; Marjoribanks & Farquharson, 2017; Skinner et al., 2013).

Purpose of the present study

Despite the aforementioned body of work, there have not been conclusive outcomes regarding why racism continues to occur in both grassroots and elite Australian sport. Additionally, prior studies have not conducted a cultural study involving qualitative document analysis of historical documents and media articles. Accordingly, the research question guiding this case study is: *'How does historical and contemporary racial discrimination influence the experience and retention of people from First Nations and CALD backgrounds in Australian sport?'*

Methods

Based on the proposed research model in Figure 1, this study adopted qualitative document analysis to address the key research question and objective. The overarching objective of this study is to investigate the issue of racism in ARF, Cricket, Netball, and Swimming in an Australian context. This is with the output goal of raising awareness of Anti-Racism recommendations and advocating for social justice for people from First Nations and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds in Australian sporting contexts. In the section below, we outline the Qualitative Document Analysis research method for this study for both primary and secondary sources.

The documents selected for this study were divided into two categories: primary and secondary sources. For this research, online media articles were treated as primary sources, providing firsthand information. Official government documents, official sports clubs' documents, and official sports websites were also treated as primary sources. All primary sources selected for this research were evaluated for authenticity and direct relevance to the phenomena under study. The secondary sources were peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and unpublished research theses that provide information about the topic and were typically interpreted, analysed, or summarised by others once the events of racism had occurred.

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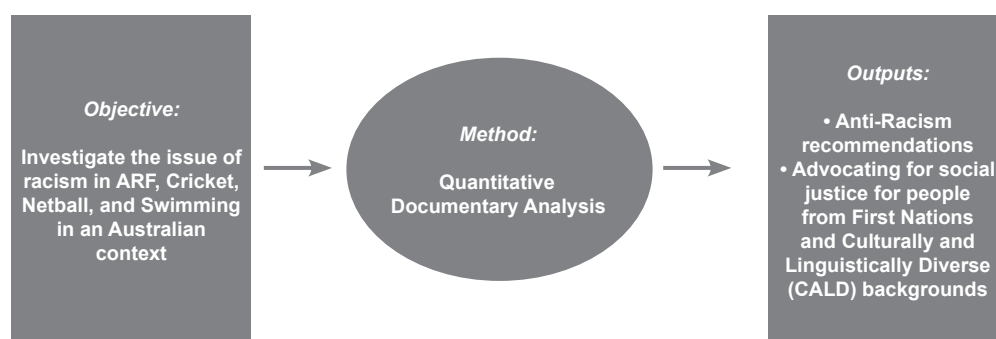


Figure 1. Visual Representation of the Research Model

The primary sources for this research were sourced from official websites such as Australian National Sporting Organisations (NSOs) and archival sources including the Australian Sports Commission, the Australian Olympic Committee, and the National Archives of Australia. The National Library of Australia's Trove search engine was used to collect data from the sports sections of all mainstream Australian online media articles about the four sports under investigation. Within this search, keywords related to 'First Nations,' 'Culturally and Linguistically Diverse,' and 'racism' were used. All secondary sources were accessed through the University of New England Library in Australia. For Australian Rules Football (ARF), Cricket, Netball, and Swimming, searches were conducted from the earliest known year it was played in or introduced in Australia through to December, 2025. Search terms were similar across sports, using phrases such as "Australian Rules Football and Racism" to identify relevant primary and secondary sources. This information was then collected and stored in NVivo 15 for thematic document analysis to investigate key events related to racism in grassroots and elite-level Australian sport for people from First Nations or CALD backgrounds. Analysis of primary sources, supported by secondary sources, validated the study's data and reliability, which are important components of the document analysis procedure (Cheong et al., 2023).

Results

The results of the data analysis for each of the four sports are outlined in the following section. Each of the qualitative document analysis examples outlined below explores both historical and contemporary examples of participation and racism in the relevant sport among people from First Nations and CALD backgrounds, before moving to issues related to racism. ARF, Cricket, Netball, and Swimming most often explore the experiences of First Nations Australians, as the available data sourced for the document analysis did not provide sufficient evidence to include an equal focus on people from CALD backgrounds as intended. This highlights the need for additional research and media awareness in this area to explore the experiences of people from CALD backgrounds in these popular Australian participation sports. Collectively, the results

section is further supported by incorporating literature from both Australian and international perspectives to validate the data analysis outcomes.

Australian Rules Football

The historical origins of ARF in modern Australia can be traced to middle-class British immigrants in Victoria during the 1850s, followed by the establishment of the Victorian Football League (VFL) in 1877. The inaugural VFL men's competition commenced in 1897 and progressed from its Victorian establishment. ARF subsequently expanded to other States and Territories nationwide. In 1990, the Australian Football League (AFL) was established, marking the beginning of a new era of professionalization in the game (Stewart et al., 1997). The popularity of ARF continues today, including at the grassroots level, with nearly 1 million (953,560) Australian adults and children participating annually (Australian Sports Commission, 2023).

During the establishment of ARF in the late 19th Century, most migrants were from Britain and Ireland (Jupp, 1998). Accordingly, the game evolved under strong Anglo-Celtic influence, with minimal participation by people from CALD backgrounds in both the men's and women's games. There were some exceptions with a small number of players from German, Greek, Italian, and Croatian backgrounds following post-World War II migration (Mosely, 1997; Stewart et al., 1997). A small number of Australians of Chinese heritage were among the earliest non-European migrants to participate in ARF, dating back to 1882 (Ding, 2023). Despite this image of diversity, many of these non-Anglo-Celtic players faced racial discrimination for their participation in ARF. For example, in 1908, the Carlton Football Club included a Chinese player, Wally Koochew, on its team. Koochew's selection, however, created debate among club members and spectators. In one incident, a club member returned his membership because he felt 'uncomfortable' having a Chinese player at the club (Stewart et al., 1997). This highlights the centrality of racism embedded in the community at that time towards people of non-White backgrounds in Australia. This history parallels the racial discrimination in other areas of the Commonwealth faced by Canadian Chinese migrants under the Chinese Exclusion Act (Parks Canada, 2025). Because of social exclusion

from the broader Australian community, Chinese Australians have historically established their own ARF clubs and competed among themselves (Ding, 2023).

By comparison, from the 1880s onwards, strong enthusiasm for First Nations Australians was evident in the ARF community (Stewart et al., 1997). By the 1940s, many First Nations people played ARF across most regions of Australia (Gorman et al., 2015). Among them was Norm McDonald, who played for Essendon in the VFL (1947–1953), an achievement considered exceptional for a First Nations player at the time (First Peoples State Relations [FPSR], 2019)). This is due to the overlapping history with the Australian Government's racially discriminatory policies towards First Nations people, initially under the Aborigines Protection Act (Aborigines Protection Act, 1909), followed by the Policy of Assimilation (Native Welfare Conference, 1961). Under the Assimilation policy in particular, many First Nations children "of mixed blood" (Australian Law Reform Commission [ALRC], 2010, para. 5) were forcibly removed from their parents and communities to live in orphanages (Taylor, 2000). Many of these children, particularly boys, would spend substantial recreation time playing ARF at the orphanages, with Graham 'Polly' Farmer being one of these children (Taylor, 2000). By 1962, the Geelong Football Club in Melbourne recruited Farmer, who had an illustrious VFL career (Mosely, 1997; Taylor, 2000). Following the AFL's formation in 1990, the sport grew substantially among First Nations youth. By 1995, 29 male Australian Aboriginal players were in the AFL (Stewart et al., 1997), with participation numbers gradually increasing over the following decades. By 2020, there were 87 male First Nations players in the league (Atkinson & Lawson, 2020). This is a significant outcome for First Nations peoples in Australia, in parallel with Māori participation in rugby in New Zealand (Calabrò, 2016) and with Canada's First Nations peoples' participation in sports such as ice hockey (Norman et al., 2022).

Despite the relatively strong participation of First Nations people in AFL from grassroots to elite level, there have been ongoing and publicly visible incidents of racism within the sport. For example, in 1993, a notable incident occurred following a game between the St. Kilda and Collingwood AFL teams. St. Kilda First Nations player, Nicky Winmar, had experienced racial abuse from Collingwood supporters throughout

the game, which resulted in Winmar turning to the Collingwood crowd, lifting his guernsey, and pointing his finger to the colour of his skin with pride (Stewart et al., 1997). Winmar says, "I think many people now understand why I did it. It has made Aboriginal people stand up tall. We've been in the shadows for so many years" (as cited in Gardiner, 1997, p. 10).

Following this event, another critical incident occurred in later years. In 1995, Collingwood player Damian Monkhorst racially abused First Nations player Michael Long from the Essendon team in front of the umpire (Stewart et al., 1997). Both Winmar and Long incidents placed significant pressure on the AFL administration to address problems of racism within the sport. Later in 1995, anti-vilification laws were introduced to address ingrained racism within the ARF. Despite this, incidents of racism towards First Nations players continue well into the 21st Century. This was particularly evident in the case of Sydney Swans AFL player Adam Goodes. In 2013, when the Swans were playing against Collingwood, a young Collingwood female fan called Goodes an 'ape'; widely considered a racial slur. The girl was reprimanded and later apologised to Goodes, who responded to the incident by saying that while being called 'monkey' or 'ape' was 'shattering,' he did not blame the girl herself. Rather, "...it's what she hears, in the environment she's grown up in, that has made her think that it is OK." (National Museum of Australia, 2023, "Collingwood incident" section).

Alongside the racism experienced by First Nations athletes such as Winmar, Long, and Goodes, CALD populations have also experienced challenges with racism at the professional level of the sport during the 2010s. Sudanese migrants have emerged as another cultural group to exert a noticeable influence within ARF in recent years. This ongoing racism has occurred despite the public image of cultural diversity within the ARF and a Multicultural Round hosted each year since 2005. In both 2011 and 2018, well-known Sudanese player Majak Daw was involved in two high-profile incidents of racial discrimination. Firstly, being racially abused by a Port Melbourne Football Club supporter in 2011, followed by experiencing racist insults online in 2018. The latter incident occurred in response to an image published on the AFL's official Facebook page in which Daw was photographed holding and playing with one of his teammates' children (Talbot, 2019). A public comment

on the picture stated: “What a frightening experience for the youngster. Face to face with a gorilla” (Talbot, 2019, para. 4). The racial abuse experienced by Daw and other players of Sudanese heritage in the ARF draws parallels to the interpersonal racism encountered by athletes of African heritage reported in Canadian sports (Canning, 2025).

Cricket

Traditionally, cricket has been perceived as an English game due to its origins in the United Kingdom (Duinen, 2018). Despite participation of nearly 800,000 Australians at the community grassroots level, there has been minimal engagement in this sport among people from CALD backgrounds (Australian Sports Commission, 2023). Similar trends can be observed among First Nations Australians with their relatively low levels of grassroots and elite participation in cricket, compared to ARF or Rugby League (Evans et al., 2015). Prior to 2017, only one First Nations man, Jason Gillespie, and one woman, Faith Thomas, had ever been selected for the national cricket team (Klugman, 2017; Tatz, 1995). More recently, however, there has been increased participation by First Nations cricketers, including female player Ashleigh Gardner and male cricketers Scott Boland, D’Arcy Short, and Dan Christian, all of whom have represented Australia (Cricket Australia, 2023).

In the context of First Nations cricketers and racism, the findings of this study highlight both historical and contemporary concerns. The earliest First Nations player to reach stardom at the national level was Eddie Gilbert in the 1930s. Gilbert played 19 matches in total for the Queensland State team and was considered one of the greatest fast bowlers of his time. Gilbert’s career, however, did not progress to playing for Australia due to conflicting opinions among some umpires about his bowling technique (ESPN Sports Media, 2023). There was also some opinion that Gilbert was racially discriminated against:

“Controversy still rages over the question of possible racial discrimination relating to Eddie Gilbert’s career. There seems little doubt that he was discriminated against as an ‘Aborigine.’ He was escorted constantly by white bureaucrats and cricket officials and the constant slurs on his bowling style” (Evans, 1983, para. 7).

The statement above demonstrates that Gilbert was subjected to discrimination because of his Aboriginal identity, racial profiling, and prejudice, which ultimately ended his cricket career. Gilbert’s treatment in cricket during the 1930s reflected systemic racist attitudes towards First Nations Australians that existed across Australia during this period (Rodwell, 2024).

Nearly one century later, First Nations cricketers have shared similar concerns about casual racism in the sport as outlined below. In contrast to Gilbert, however, these contemporary athletes have been brought into question based on their lighter skin colour and questions surrounding their Aboriginality (Walsh, 2020). Our data analysis also revealed other factors that are likely to influence First Nations people’s negative attitudes towards participation in cricket and a reduced sense of belonging. Cricket Australia’s designation of January 26th (Australia Day) as a critical date for hosting an international cricket match (SBS News, 2023) is deemed to be culturally insensitive and disrespectful. First Nations Australian’s consider January 26th to be a dark day in history due to the 1788 British invasion of their land (Jupp, 1998). Contemporary Australian attitudes among First Nations people and the broader community illustrate that January 26th is increasingly being viewed as a day of mourning and insensitive timing for a major sporting event. In 2023, Ashleigh Gardner criticised Cricket Australia’s decision by stating her disappointment on Twitter, later quoted in Decent (2023):

“As a proud Muruwar woman... I also am fortunate enough to play cricket for a living, which I dreamt of as a kid. Unfortunately, this year, the Australian women’s cricket team has been scheduled to play a game on the 26th of January, which does not sit well with me as an individual but with all the people I am representing. As a national team, we have a platform to raise awareness about certain issues. I am using this platform to hopefully help educate others on a journey to learn about the longest-living culture in the world. For those who do not have a good understanding of what that day means, it was the beginning of genocide, massacres and dispossession. When I take the field for this game, I will reflect and think about all my ancestors and people’s lives who changed from this day.”

This statement by Gardner reflects Australian First Nations people's suffering and pain associated with colonisation and its intersections with sport. By comparison, the 2026 Cricket Australia calendar did not include an international cricket match on January 26th (Cricket Australia, 2025). Although Cricket Australia did not release official communications regarding this decision, contemporary analysis may suggest this decision was made as a mark of respect towards the First Nations' Australian community, who have previously been vocal about the placement of this Australia Day event. In 2022, Litchfield et al. noted that Cricket Australia had been on a decade-long mission to address racism within the sport through initiatives such as their Reconciliation Action Plan. Although omitting an Australia Day match from the 2026 calendar is a small step, it will hopefully be a landmark event in positive cultural change within the sport.

Beyond First Nations Australian involvement in cricket, the sport has historically failed to attract CALD migrants despite its international popularity in non-English speaking countries such as India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. These trends have been reflected since the 20th century when in the post-World War II era, many European migrants demonstrated a strong interest in soccer compared to cricket which has an unofficial reputation as Australia's national sport. It has been proposed that language barriers and the complexity of cricket have deterred new players from CALD backgrounds, in contrast to the relative simplicity and global familiarity of Soccer (Cashman, 1997). Despite these historical sporting trends in Australia, there have, however, been a small number of non-English speaking, European migrants who have participated in community and elite-level Australian cricket. Most notable among this cohort is Michael Kasprovicz, of Polish descent, who had a successful career playing international cricket for Australia 1996–2006 (ESPN Sports Media, 2026).

For other CALD migrant diasporas, such as the South Asian community, there have been more substantial outcomes. Largely, this is due to cricket's popularity in several South Asian countries that have shared history with the British Empire. Thus, both grassroots and elite-level cricket in Australia have gradually begun to reflect the South Asian population more closely. In 2003, Lisa Sthalekar, an Australian cricketer of Indian heritage, made her debut as an all-rounder for the national women's cricket team (Reckon

Talk, n.d.). In the men's Fifth Ashes Test match between Australia and England at the Sydney Cricket Ground in the 2010–2011 series, Australia selected its first Pakistani-born cricketer, Usman Khawaja (Pandaram & Braid, 2010). Given the prominence of key players such as Sthalekar and Khawaja in their respective Australian women's and men's national teams, combined with the growing migration of people from South Asian countries to Australia, grassroots-level cricket participation among children from these diaspora communities has increased substantially. Recent data shows that at club level cricket, 32% of the players were either born overseas or to an immigrant parent. The most common surnames at these Australian cricket clubs today are Singh and Patel, both common among Indian people (SBS News, 2022).

Although participation in cricket is growing among the South Asian population in Australia, ongoing challenges with racial discrimination exist. According to Khawaja, cricket in Australia can be perceived as having “subconscious racial bias” (Fox Cricket, 2023, para. 1) in selection practice, at all levels of the game. When asked about his perception of the problem, Khawaja said: “...having the highest positions in Australian cricket – from administration to selectors – all filled by white personnel is a major issue. There is subconscious bias. If you have two cricketers, one brown, one white, both the same, the white coach will pick the white cricketer just because he has a son that might look like him. It is what is familiar to him.” (Fox Cricket, 2023, para. 6–7). Similarly, Patel's (2024), work focused on South Asian communities and cricket participation in Britain, also highlights that unconscious racial bias is a factor affecting the participation of CALD players in the sport. Beyond South Asian communities, this issue of racial bias, either unconscious or institutional, has been identified as both a historical and contemporary issue within South African cricket (Allie, 2020).

At the time of writing, Khawaja remains an exceptional case of notably being the only athlete from the South Asian community to play international test cricket for Australia. Beyond the issue of “subconscious racial bias” (Fox Cricket, 2023, para. 1), shared by Khawaja, he has also been public about direct occurrences of racial bias. As shared in a reflection on Khawaja's X account: “I got stopped 3 times last year at our hotel, while in Australian kit and asked if I was with the Australian Cricket team...” (Khawaja,

2022, as cited in Fox Cricket, 2023, para. 9). Khawaja believes this attitude needs to change among the general Australian population so cricket can grow beyond its Anglo-Celtic origins (Fox Cricket, 2023). On this note, it is valuable to compare Khawaja's experience with another Pakistani-born British professional cricketer, Azeem Rafiq. Rafiq experienced direct racism on multiple occasions throughout his career, based on abuse founded on his Pakistani heritage, with this racism ultimately resulting in his departure from elite-level cricket (Patel, 2024). The comparison of racism in cricket faced by both Khawaja and Rafiq illustrates the difficulties faced by players from CALD backgrounds participating in and to excelling in cricket in both Australia and England. This has been reflected in the literature whereby Collins (2021) examines parallels between 'Englishness' and 'racial thinking' as an ingrained aspect of the nation's sporting culture. Hussain et al.'s (2022) research further reinforces racism in international cricket as a global challenge, particularly in the context of examining reported media events within the sport that represent both implicit racial bias and unconscious racism.

Netball

Netball is another Australian sport that has traditionally had a strong historical association with Britain (Hess, 2022; Duncan & Weatherburn, 1997). National participation data for adults and children in recent years indicate that 939,300 Australians participate in netball annually, with participation among women and girls particularly high (Australian Sports Commission, 2023). Netball is popular in schools and the community, alongside state, national, and international competitions (Duncan & Weatherburn, 1997). However, this data does not adequately reflect the participation and representation of Australia's First Nations people and those from CALD backgrounds. Netball has long been considered a sport for "White middle-class Anglo-Australian women" (Taylor, 2000, p. 28) and has lacked cultural diversity. As recently as 2020, even Netball Australia's Chief Executive, Marne Fecher, recognised the growing criticism of netball in Australia for its "lack of diversity" and its failure to adequately represent multicultural Australia (Keoghan, 2020, para.1).

First Nations players comprise almost 4% of Australia's netball population, which is above par with the representation of First Nations people in the broader

Australian population (Keoghan, 2020). Despite this strong grassroots participation, First Nations players have been underrepresented in the Australian national team; to date, only three First Nations female players have been selected to represent Australia: Marcia Ella-Duncan, Sharon Finnan-White, and Donnell Wallam (National Library of Australia, 2025). In 2021, Sharon Finnan-White said "...that decades of unconscious bias and racism have made it almost impossible for First Nations netballers to excel through elite pathways" (Airth, 2021, para. 3). Without the opportunity to excel at the elite level, particularly at the national level, First Nations women have reduced opportunity for selection to represent Australia. An article published in 2020 illustrates the issue of racism among Australian First Nations women's netball players from the grassroots level to the elite level. The statement below demonstrates how racism has the potential to influence a Netball player's career and aspirations:

"Throughout my entire netball journey, I experienced racism. More than any other factor, this led to the end of the career I did not even get a chance to start. The racism I experienced came in many forms and always in waves. Sometimes in micro-aggressions, other times in gaslighting my experiences, and more than a few times in direct language and actions. I experienced ostracising by my teammates, and racist remarks disguised as attempted failed jokes" (Carnegie, 2020, para. 5–8).

This statement illustrates the extent of racism towards First Nations players in Australian Netball and how this can lead to the loss of talent when players prematurely end their careers in the sport. According to Carnegie (2020, para. 9), the most discouraging aspect of this racist behavior is that leadership within the sport did not take a strong stance to discouraging it from occurring: "Most of the time, these remarks were heard by coaches and managers in the vicinity, and still, there were no consequences." As Khatibi et al.'s (2023) research would suggest, such occurrences are unaided by the fact that the underrepresentation of First Nations Australians in positions of sporting leadership contributes to the ongoing exclusion of Indigenous Australians. Although this study is drawn on ARF leadership, the comparisons to similar cultural and structural challenges in Netball are relevant.

This research aligns with Nareen Young's views. As a First Nation's woman and former board director of Netball Australia, she states, "...racism had been

‘normalized’ in the sport” (Reid, 2022, para. 5–6). Young further suggests that, “My observation and experience over many years is there is quite a lot of racism in netball at every level, including the board” (Reid, 2022, para. 7). This statement by Young can be linked clearly with the issue of institutional racism (Crawford, 2019), and the way in which it has been normalised within the Australian Netball culture, evidently affecting the full participation and achievement of Australian First Nation’s athletes within the sport. Comparatively, racial discrimination in Netball has also been observed in other Commonwealth countries such as New Zealand (Nakhid & Enari, 2025) and England (Ward et al., 2024). Both studies highlight that when people from minority backgrounds experience racism in sport, especially young girls, this becomes a barrier to participation in not only Netball, but sports participation more broadly.

Further events that brought these issues to the fore in Australian Netball relate to the 2022 conflict between Australia’s wealthiest businesswoman, Gina Rinehart, and the Australian women’s Netball team. First Nations athlete Donnell Wallam refused to wear the Australian Netball uniform bearing the logo of Rinehart’s company, Hancock Prospecting, a significant sponsor of Australian Netball. This was based on Rinehart’s late father, Lang Hancock, making racist comments against First Nations Australians (Robinson, 2022) by stating, “Indigenous Australians should be sterilised to solve the problem” (National Film and Sound Archive of Australia, 1984). Wallam’s teammates supported her decision in refusing to wear the uniform bearing the Hancock Prospecting logo, however this resulted in Rinehart withdrawing \$15 million in sponsorship. This decision then had further implications of a high-profile incident and online racial abuse towards Wallam via social media (Knaus, 2022). Additionally, Wallam was excluded from the Australian team for several international matches without explanation from Netball Australia (Symons, 2024). Collectively, these examples highlight that Netball in Australia continues to face challenges related to racism and to inclusive practices that support cultural diversity within the sport.

Swimming

More than 3.6 million Australian adults are estimated to participate in swimming across both organised and non-organised settings, whilst over 4.1 million children reflect similar participation trends

(Australian Sports Commission, 2023). Despite the widespread popularity of swimming, participation among First Nations people for both recreational and competitive purposes has always been relatively low in Australia (Willcox-Pidgeon et al., 2020; Woods et al., 2022). A high-profile exception to this case is Samantha Riley, a First Nations Olympic swimmer, although it should be noted that Riley was unaware of her family heritage when competing (Australian Olympic Committee, 2024). These low levels of participation in swimming among First Nations Australians are perhaps unexpected, given that swimming is culturally important for Torres Strait Islander people, given their geographic location of origin from islands in Northern Australia. This is perhaps due to limited access to swimming pools, as with many Aboriginal people who may live inland or in outback Australia.

Beyond geography, the effects of Western colonisation cannot be denied. Forcing Aboriginal people to live on missions away from Country in part led to a loss of swimming skill and opportunity (Stronach et al., 2019), alongside the racial segregation and discrimination policies that did not allow First Nations Australian people to access swimming pools available in their local communities. The 1967 Referendum granted First Nations Australians equal rights and recognition to the broader population (Jupp, 1998), which led to some positive changes. It is undeniable, however, that the impacts of this exclusion and racism have ongoing impacts and continue to occur in contemporary Australia. As recently as 2025, there was an incident reported in the media where First Nations children were evicted from a swimming pool in regional New South Wales due to alleged misbehaviour, with this resulting in debate around cultural discrimination (Jash, 2025).

In the context of the CALD community in Australia, it is important to examine the large, growing diaspora populations from across Asia (Jupp, 1998; McDougall, 2019) and their participation in swimming. Internationally, there are strong representations of elite swimmers from Asian countries are well represented. This is especially true of countries such as China, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore (Horton, 2012). In the Australian context, however, the Asian community had minimal visible success at the highest level of Australian swimming. Exceptions were the Chinese-born William Yang, who represented Australia at the 2024 Olympics and several

other international competitions (New South Wales Institute of Sport, 2024). When reflecting upon his success as an Australian swimmer with Asian heritage, Yang believes that he has been a role model for others with similar family heritage: “I never really thought I am disadvantaged because I am Asian. I just tried as hard as I could” (Cheng, 2022, para. 6). In Yang’s case, his success can be attributed primarily to his potential and hard work. To date, there has not been evidence of exclusion or racial vilification because of his CALD background. Although perhaps there are other factors worthy of investigation at the community grassroots level as to why there have not been more young people from CALD backgrounds transitioning to the elite levels of the sport.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the evidence presented within this paper demonstrates both historical and contemporary examples of racism in ARF, Cricket, Netball, and Swimming in Australia. Although these experiences may not apply to every First Nations or CALD background athlete participating in these sports at the community grassroots or elite level, it is clear that historically ingrained practices of racism still continue to be an ongoing problem in these sporting contexts. Based on the perspectives of athletes presented in this paper alone, we argue that racism negatively influences the participation, longevity, and sense of belonging of people from First Nations and CALD backgrounds across these four popular Australian sports. This can illustrate both institutional and systematic race-related problems. To address this issue, it is recommended that further improvements continue to take place across the Australian sport contexts to reinforce anti-racism and discrimination. Whilst current government initiatives have attempted to make gains in this space, current initiatives work well to eliminate surface-level and casual racism. In contrast, our analysis demonstrates that racism in Australian sport is more likely to be institutional.

We propose that institutional racism has the greatest potential to be overcome through structural changes. Within Australian sport, this will be required from the community grassroots to the elite level. This may include more people from First Nations and CALD backgrounds being appointed to sporting bodies and

selection committees for representation of role models and to overcome potential selection bias. Initiatives can focus more on organisational and contextual changes to address racism, rather than a focus on individual behaviour such as with the “Racism. It Stops With Me” campaign (Sport Integrity Australia, 2024). Beyond these formal anti-racism recommendations, this improvement in institutional practices can also be viewed from a social justice perspective. For Australians from both First Nations and CALD backgrounds, effective participation and performance in sports such as ARF, Cricket, Netball, and Swimming require fairness and equity across all aspects of participation. In the long term, this not only improves access for culturally diverse populations to sports participation, but also creates stronger social cohesion between the dominant White population of Australia and cultural minority groups. It has the potential to further enhance migration and settlement outcomes for Australians from CALD backgrounds and aid in closing the gap in health inequities experienced by First Nations Australians through increasing physical activity levels. Creating a milieu of understanding and cross-cultural social inclusion will ultimately form a key component in addressing changes towards racism on a larger scale.

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The author(s) declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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All data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request

Declaration of Authors' Contributions

The author(s) contributed to all aspects of the conception, development, and writing of this manuscript.

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