

# David Wirrpanda

Healesville Primary School 1984 – 1989

West Coast Eagles star defender David Wirrpanda says if he hadn't been drafted to the AFL in 1996 at the tender age of 16, he would have become a draftsman. "I would like to be an architect," he admits. "I have a real interest in design. I probably didn't really consider playing AFL until I was 14. I watched my cousin Sean Charles play. He played for Melbourne and people were so excited about his talent that it made me think: 'I want to do this'."

The 2009 Young Western Australian of the Year remains the West Coast Eagles' youngest ever debutant. Sometimes called 'The Janitor' for his ability to mop up the football in his backline, he was kicking a footy almost from the time he could walk.

So it's not surprising that his fondest memories of primary school were sports days and lunchtimes, when he could rally a team for a rousing game of kick-to-kick on the oval.

"I spent most of my primary school years at Healesville, which is in a rural part of Melbourne and surrounded by bush. In my final year we moved to the eastern suburbs of Melbourne and I went to Parkmore Primary School," Mr Wirrpanda says. "I think my fellow classmates would remember me as being very shy. I was also the only Aboriginal student in the class at the time.

"The best thing about going to school was playing sport every Friday – that and making friends. Spelling and maths were my biggest challenges but my teacher, Trevor Saunders (now principal of Mt Waverley Primary School), was great. He helped me through, and he also had a huge love of sport," Mr Wirrpanda says.

"I loved sport because I enjoyed making friends and it was such great fun," he continues. "I liked art class as well. Art is one other talent I have developed other than football. I enjoy painting and currently I am dabbling with jewellery design and crafting."

Mr Wirrpanda's football prowess is matched by his community work in helping to improve the lives of young Indigenous Australians, first and foremost through the David Wirrpanda Foundation, which he launched in 2005. The foundation aims to assist and develop young Indigenous people through education, promoting strong role models, healthy lifestyles and building self-esteem. These messages are delivered through a range of programs, including the Wirra Club for primary school-aged children, and the 'On My Way' program, which runs in secondary schools throughout the Pilbara region in Western Australian.

"Setting up the foundation and winning the AFL premiership in 2006 have been my greatest achievements," he says. "Our programs are geared around school attendance and good behaviour. Our message to the Aboriginal community is if we educate our children it will empower them to gain better jobs, improved health and experience less poverty. It all comes down to sending our kids to school regularly and supporting their achievements not only in sport but in education," he explains.

"We have groups of children coming through the foundation each day, it's great to see the changes in these kids each week and I hope I play a small part in that. Watching them grow and seeing them flourish gives you a great buzz. The regional visits are also great and we are always keen to take the foundation services to where they are needed.

"I love my football but family always comes first and that's why our kids mean so much to me," he continues. "I tell them that as much as I love playing football I would trade my premiership medal to have finished

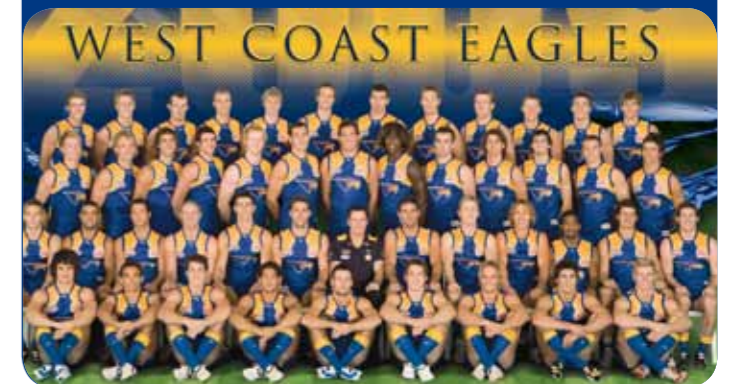
Former Healesville Primary student and West Coast Eagles player, David Wirrpanda, says he always tells children that education should come before sport. "I tell them that as much as I love playing football, I would trade my premiership medal to have finished high school."

## Then



David Wirrpanda in Year 6 at Parkmore Primary. "I think my fellow classmates would remember me as being very shy."

## Now



David Wirrpanda in a team shot of a different kind – the official publicity photo of the West Coast Eagles, the AFL team for which the West Australian native now plays.

high school. Education is the very best choice you make in life as it gives you the power to choose your career and ultimately your destiny – that's what my mother and my grandmother told me. They are the two greatest role models in my life. They taught me about my culture and my heritage, which empowered me to set up the foundation and to deliver knowledge about Indigenous culture to anyone who has an interest in it. My mum was paramount in stressing the importance of education and never let me miss school."

Aside from his mother and grandmother – and his former primary school teacher Trevor Saunders – Mr Wirrpanda says the person he most admires is US President Barak Obama. "I am in awe of him and the statement of appointing him as the first black president of the United States has sent a great message to the world. He is also the 44th president, which is my playing number!" ■

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