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## WIRRPANDA: A WARRIOR FOR HIS PEOPLE

The AFL's indigenous round could have few better role models than Eagles champion David Wirrpanda. As West Coast pays tribute today to one of its favourite sons **Billy Rule** meets a man who still has a long way to go on his journey

IN footy you have a choice, you play the ball or the man.

On a balmy Saturday night in April 1999 with the static buzz of 30,000 fans in his eardrums, David Wirrpanda plays the ball. He can see it in front of him and the 19-year-old instinctively sweeps out of the back pocket and reaches for the Sherrin in preparation for his next charge up Subiaco Oval.

Brisbane captain Michael Voss also sees the ball. But no matter how quickly those glistening, granite shoulders drive him forward he soon realises it will be impossible to win the race to the footy. So, when you can't get the ball, you stop the man with the ball. And that's what he does.

CRASH ... then silence. Nothing.

Wirrpanda's brain feels loose. He smells dry grass. There's the salty taste of saliva, sweat and warm blood in his mouth. Fragments of glass wobble in his gums. No, not glass, teeth. He feels them on his tongue and dribbles, then spits six of them on to the ground ... right next to the ball. The ball!

Suddenly, like the switch of a radio dial, the sound comes back: "Go Wirra. C'mon Wirra. Get it Wirra. Get up! Get up!"

He grabs the footy, glances around to judge his bearings and sees a boundary line. Not knowing any better he scrambles along that white marker and kicks downfield, leaving six of his finest fangs on Subiaco Oval. A trainer will later find five of the teeth and keep their nerves alive in a jar of salty Vegemite. West Coast win the match 11.17 (83) to 11.7 (73) and Wirrpanda picks up a Brownlow Medal vote.

Spin the highlight reel 10 years forward. Roughly 150m from that brutal Voss shirt front Wirrpanda can't fulfil his duties. He's in the offices of the old Subiaco Footy Club where the David Wirrpanda Foundation is based.

A nine-year-old Aboriginal girl suffering from mental and sexual abuse is being counselled by foundation staff. Wirrpanda turns away. He can cop some broken teeth but not a broken heart.

"Nothing," he says defiantly. "Nothing compares to what some of these kids go through. You think copping a knock in a footy match is hard. It's a walk in the park compared to what I see in here sometimes."

Say the name David Wirrpanda.

For years he let people spell it Wirr-i-punda to get the pronunciation right, but in 2006 he changed it back out of respect to his father and his bloodlines.

Wirrpanda's father, you see, is a Djapu man who still lives traditionally among the Yolngu (Arnhem Land) people. But he's not just any Djapu man. David's father is king and David \_ being his eldest son \_ has royal blood flowing through his veins. Today at Subiaco Oval Wirrpanda will be treated to another kind of royalty \_ footballing royalty. After 227 games, a premiership flag, a grand final, All-Australian selection and being responsible for countless practical jokes on his teammates, Wirrpanda will be officially farewelled from the club that has been his life for 14 years. Appropriately, today's match against St Kilda is part of the AFL's indigenous round. Each year two games \_ last night's "Dreamtime at the 'G'" clash and today's West Coast fixture \_ are played in acknowledgment of Aboriginal footballers.

Awareness of the indigenous contribution to Australia's national game has become a

predominant part of the code. Of the 800 footballers playing this season, 84, or 11 per cent, are indigenous. That's a badge the AFL wears with pride considering Aborigines make up just 2 per cent of the population.

But it has only been in the past 30 years that a conscious effort to appreciate indigenous footballers was made. Before 1980 only 23 Aborigines had strapped on the boots at the top level. Two of the greats from those darker days were West Australians. The legendary Graham "Polly" Farmer, who played for Geelong from 1962-67 and was named in the AFL Team of the Century, and Carlton's Syd Jackson (136 games between 1969-76).

There were others, too, but their stories embarrass rather than inspire \_ one of them being Sir Douglas Nicholls, a distant relative of Wirrpanda. Nicholls was recruited by Carlton in 1926, but didn't play after he overheard teammates saying he smelt and trainers wouldn't rub him because he was black.

The wake-up call for the AFL came in 1993 when another West Aussie, Nicky Winmar, raised his St Kilda jumper to a racist crowd and pointed to his chest, proclaiming: "I'm proud to be black." In 1995 Essendon's Michael Long also made a stand and soon after the racial vilification code was created.

Those days of activism appear to have worked. In his 15 years at West Coast Wirrpanda says he was never racially abused. "Nup, never," he says. "In fact, if someone was being a bit of a smart arse they actually got pulled up by everyone else in the crowd. The awareness of Aboriginal culture has come a long way in the last 10 years. But there is still a long way to go \_ let me tell you."

And so he does. Wirrpanda can play football but he can also tell a story. Over the next day or so he tells me a few.

He tells me a story about himself, a boy born in Carlton, Victoria, on August 3, 1979, who sees more than he should.

As an innocent nine-year-old he watches from the sideline as Fletcher, his older brother on his mother's side, plays footy. Something doesn't seem right. Another player starts hitting Fletcher. Then another player hits him, and another, and another, and another. Soon the whole team has set upon Fletcher who quickly realises he has to get out of there. So he runs to the nearest police station and climbs on the roof, thinking he's going to be safe. Unfortunately, the local copper just happens to be the ruckman of the team beating him up so Fletcher hops down and the chase starts again.

Wirrpanda finishes the tale with a grin in a "one-day-we'll-laugh-about-this" manner, but he then shakes his head with despair.

"Mate, every day I would see it," he said. "Walking the streets people would smash us. Grown men would give it to my mum and my grandmother as us kids were walking along next to them."

What about at school?

"Of course," he says. "But I knew what the deal was. Getting picked on by little kids was nothing compared to what my mum and my grandma went through. Me getting abused was nothing ... only words. We all knew what to expect. Everything was open. There were no cards on the chest because there was no point trying to keep anything secret. Mum would tell us, 'Well, you've been born black and you're gonna die black. It's who you are and be proud of who you are.'"

Advice from his mother, Margaret Briggs Wirrpanda, and grandmother, Geraldine Briggs OA (Order of Australia), is something that has moulded Wirrpanda into the man he is today. The two women were passionate campaigners for Aboriginal rights and would drag David and his siblings to political meetings throughout Victoria and New South Wales. The awareness of what his mother and grandmother were doing resonated with David who showed maturity beyond his years.

Trevor Nisbett, who was football manager when West Coast recruited Wirrpanda in 1996, saw that steel-laced spine from day one.

"I think he had this inner vision," Nisbett said. "It's very strange to sit next to a 16-

year-old kid who can actually tell you he's going to make a difference with his community.

“Football was always going to be the opportunity to give him a profile so that he could do what he does now (with the DWF).”

And so the foundation was established in 2005 with just two people sitting in the office. In 2007 Nisbett recruited chief executive Lisa Cunningham from the AFL's SportsReady program. And three years later there are 13 full-time staff, eight casual workers and scores of volunteers as the foundation attempts to juggle the flood of requests that wash over them.

The DWF core objectives are to keep indigenous students in school, promote strong role models and emphasise healthy, positive life choices.

Apart from being a role model Wirrpanda is also the face of the organisation and receives dozens of requests to speak at, or take part in, events supporting the DWF. Last Saturday night at the Park Hyatt was another date in a busy diary. Having been in Melbourne for a 5am to 1pm practice session for Dancing with the Stars, Wirrpanda flew into Perth at 8pm and went straight to the Hyatt.

At 10pm I watch as he gives an inspiring 45-minute speech. Charming the ladies with politeness, befriending the blokes with his humour and galvanising support for his cause with addictive anecdotes.

When we meet on Monday and laugh about some of his Saturday night stories he said: “I'll tell you another one.”

“Two years ago I was playing my 200th game against Collingwood at Subiaco. It was the indigenous round and I wanted Dad to come down to watch. As I said, my father lives a very traditional life \_ and he's only ever come to a handful of games \_ but this was really important to me. Anyway, to get here from Arnhem Land he had to catch three flights which took about 10 hours and he finally arrived in Perth at 1am.

“He walks outside and says to the taxi driver, ‘Take me to my son's place’. The cabbie goes, ‘Eh, what are you talking about?’, and Dad says, ‘My son, David Wirrpanda’.

“So the cabbie takes him to Subiaco Oval and Dad's there knocking on the door waiting for someone to answer. Finally he calls my sister in Melbourne where it's 3.30am and she rings me and says, ‘What are you doing to your father? He's standing out the front of Subiaco Oval!’.

“I picked him up but, I tell you what, lucky it wasn't game day because I wouldn't have answered the phone and he'd still be there banging away.”

As Wirrpanda tours the country telling stories and charming the fans, one of the girls in the trenches back at the foundation is his model fiancé, Shannon McGuire.

They met 10 years ago when Wirrpanda shared a house with the Matera brothers in Wembley. Shannon's auntie lived next door so whenever Shannon visited she'd end up seeing Wirrpanda because her younger sister kept kicking a footy into the back yard to get the West Coast star's attention.

“I was only 14 or 15,” Shannon recalls with a smile. “The next time we caught up was when I moved to Sydney for Australia's Next Top Model. David saw me on TV and rang out of the blue. He'd just started the foundation and was seeing if I was interested. I was but being in Sydney made it hard to commit.

“When I moved back to Perth we caught up for coffee a couple of times. One thing led to another and now we've very happy.”

Apart from being Wirrpanda's fiancé, Shannon, a 2008 Miss Universe Australia finalist, has played an integral role at the foundation by establishing the Dare to Dream program for indigenous girls.

“It's specifically for the girls because, while there are lots of great indigenous programs in schools, I think a lot of them are slanted towards boys through sport and other more physical activities,” she says. “The girls tend to lose interest and miss out. To stop that we made a program targeting girls' passions which also teaches them the hard stuff they have to learn.”

Shannon confirms some days in the office are very tough.

“The stories are heart-breaking,” she says. “I couldn't imagine living in the world that some of them come from. I was very lucky to have such a good family around me. But while some of these girls have to live in that ‘other’ world I think we empower them a little bit and give them the chance to make more positive choices as they grow up.”

In August last year Wirrpanda and Shannon had a son, Marley. When I meet the Wirrpanda family in a Subiaco park both mum and dad smother their son with kisses and hugs. They caress him, clean him, whisper to him and hold him up high \_ as if he was king. Which is ironic, because one day he will be.

The Djapu tribe, where Wirrpanda's father lives in Arnhem Land, has traditions. One of them is that the king passes on his crown to the grandson of his eldest son. In this case, Marley.

When I ask David about the bloodline he answers with great depth and reveals that one day he, too, will return to Arnhem Land.

“I know my tribal responsibilities,” he says. “Dad and I talk about it.

“There was one time when he visited and said, ‘Do you understand your bloodlines?’. I do but I asked him, ‘Is it something that can be changed?’, and he said, ‘No, what goes through your veins you have no right to change, this isn't your call. It's the only thing in your life that you're not responsible for. You can't be the boss of that decision’.

“With Marley, basically, our kinship system means that everything skips a generation so Dad's title of king goes to the first-born grandson which is Marley. He's only eight months old so he doesn't know it yet, but the responsibility on his shoulders is far greater than mine. All that land up in Arnhem Land will be his. It's phenomenal.”

Shannon acknowledges the tribal loyalty of the Wirrpandas.

“The culture up there is really strong and the people are still very traditional,” she says. “I understand the responsibilities and it's really important that, in order to keep the culture alive for generations to come, Marley has to be a part of it. But for a little man he's got a lot on his plate. He's got responsibilities to his family here, responsibilities in Arnhem Land and also to David's family in Victoria.

“But whatever happens we will do our best to teach him and provide him with whatever we can to help make him the best person he can be.”

Wirrpanda will also return to Arnhem Land one day.

“I do have to go back up there,” he says. “I don't feel that I have to go \_ I want to go. I have to attend to my cultural obligations because of the status of my dad and our family.”

Nisbett confirms that the call of the land almost took Wirrpanda away from the Eagles a few times.

“He's a very different beast, David,” Nisbett says. “A remarkable young man. He was torn several times about having to head back to Arnhem Land.

“A couple of times throughout his career I had to sit him down and convince him that it wasn't the right thing to do. If he wanted to fulfil his dream of assisting his people he had to complete the journey of his footy career so that he could be someone who is so outstanding that everywhere he went for the rest of his life people knew who he was.”

And people do know who he is. Over the period we're together the phone is constantly ringing, people introduce themselves, others congratulate him. Then there's the upcoming Dancing with the Stars, his corporate speaking commitments, a game with East Perth when time permits and a possible career in politics. But the backbone of it all is his work with the foundation. His belief in children being entitled to have opportunity, innocence and love.

He tells me one more story about a boy and how love made a difference.

“Last year I went back to my old school in Healesville in Victoria to do a talk,” he says. “While speaking to the kids I noticed an older lady up the back \_ it was Mrs

Liston, my Grade 2 teacher.

“After my chat she came up to me and said, ‘David, do you remember in class I would sit on a stool and all the other children would sit in front of me, but you always sat next to me and while I read you would play with my shoe, gently stroke my ankle and hold on to my leg. I always wondered, why did you do that?’

“And I said to her, ‘Because, Mrs Liston, I just wanted to feel love and you let me have it’.

“Anyway she broke down and cried and we both had a really big hug.”

We finish our coffees in a Subiaco cafe and with his stories complete Wirrpanda walks back to be with Shannon and Marley. Soon he holds his son close to his face, cheek-to-cheek, kissing him and whispering words that no one else can hear.

Two men together. One a giant and one with gigantic expectations. The father bred to be a leader and the son born to be king.