

An Eagle aiming high

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Martin Flanagan | January 5, 2008

David Wirrpanda's got history. Among his forebears on his mother's side is Sir Doug Nicholls, one of the very first Aboriginal footballers to make it in the VFL (the AFL today). Nicholls was from the Cummeragunja mission on the Murray River. He slept in empty boxes at the Victoria Market when he first came to Melbourne in the 1920s. Small, swift and brave, he won big professional foot races, fought in boxing tents and went to Carlton, where the trainers refused to rub him because he was black. David Wirrpanda heard that story as a child.

Nicholls was also a Christian who said a footballer could preach a sermon by the way he played the game. He played for Fitzroy and Victoria and influenced a lot of people along the way. In 1972, Nicholls was knighted and, six years later, he was appointed governor of South Australia by Labor premier Don Dunstan.

David Wirrpanda's grandmother was Geraldine Briggs OA (Order of Australia). Wirrpanda used to hold the medal when he was a child. "I think Nan put the spine into all of us", he says. Nan told him life wasn't about finding yourself; it was about creating yourself. Another relative on his mother's side led what is remembered as the Cummeragunja walk-off in 1939, when the mission's Aboriginal residents walked off in protest against their living conditions. It is described as the first Aboriginal political action of its sort.

David Wirrpanda's memory of his early life in Victoria is attending meetings and listening to politics. From early on, he understood that a special responsibility attached to his upbringing. How early? "About 10 or 11."

But that's only one half of his history. David Wirrpanda is also his father's name. It was out of respect for his father that he changed his name back to its original spelling a couple of years ago (it had previously been spelt Wirripunda to assist pronunciation). His father is a Djapu man from East Arnhem Land. The early life of David Wirrpanda, West Coast footballer, was spent going backwards and forwards between his parents. In Yirrakala, he didn't speak English. There was no one to speak English to. He went hunting magpie geese and turtle. There's a story in Perth that the reason the Eagles have trouble fitting Wirrpanda with boots is because he ran around in bare feet for so much of his early life.

Wirrpanda's father impressed upon him his tribal responsibilities, and Wirrpanda says that eventually he will return to pursue them. "Eventually" is a word he uses a lot. His life is crowded. In addition to playing AFL football, he runs the David Wirrpanda Foundation, which now has a second office in the north of Western Australia where Wirrpanda has led marches against domestic violence in Aboriginal communities. But there's more history still.

David Wirrpanda's great-grandfather on his father's side is Dhakiyarr Wirrpanda. His story can be found in history books about either the Northern Territory or the High Court. In 1934, a police constable went

to East Arnhem Land to investigate the spearing of five Japanese fishermen. Not finding the Aboriginal men suspected of the crime, he arrested a woman - Dhakiyarr's wife.

When Dhakiyarr next saw his wife, she was in chains. The constable with her was the first white man Dhakiyarr had seen. He put a spear through him. The police sent a larger party to the area and captured Dhakiyarr, who was taken to Darwin, found guilty in proceedings he didn't understand and sentenced to death. After eight months, the decision was overturned by the High Court. Released from Fannie Bay Jail, Dhakiyarr mysteriously disappeared - it's commonly thought murdered by the police. "To this day, we don't know where the body is," says David Wirrpanda. Nine ceremonial poles in the foyer of the Darwin Supreme Court stand as a symbolic reminder of Dhakiyarr Wirrpanda's case.

David Wirrpanda says he didn't really have a childhood. The reason he loved footy as a kid was because it was a rest from politics. He attended Worowa Aboriginal College at Healesville, a school set up by his mother's family, and describes himself as shattered by its recent closure by the State Government.

West Coast chief executive Trevor Nesbitt was alerted to Wirrpanda, then 16, by two of the Eagles' recruiting men. They were blown away by him, says Nesbitt. "When I met him, he was everything they said. He was similar to most Aboriginal kids. He was a pretty shy boy, but he had this willingness to say, 'My heritage is very important to me. If I come to Perth, I've got more than one role to play in life.' That's what attracted us to him. He had ambitions then, he's got ambitions now." Nesbitt is on the board of the David Wirrpanda Foundation.

Wirrpanda's move to West Coast always struck me as odd since he came from such a proudly Aboriginal family in Victoria and he could not have been further from them. He now says it was a chance to test himself alone. He was 16 when he went to Perth. His mother, the formidable Margaret Wirrpanda, told coach Mick Malthouse she wasn't interested in contracts. "She said she wanted someone to be a man, a father, in my life."

Wirrpanda says Malthouse took him into his home. He admired how Malthouse structured his family life. If he has a family, he says, he'll structure it the same. He also makes it clear his wife will be an Aboriginal woman. The work he is attempting in the Aboriginal community would be diverted by a non-indigenous wife and the issues it would raise about his place in the culture.

Wirrpanda became West Coast's youngest ever debutante in 1996 when, at 17, he played against Carlton, the reigning premier, at Carlton. Among his teammates that day were two Aboriginal footballers of great note, Chris Lewis and Peter Matera. Much had been spoken about the match. The build-up was intense. Before they ran out, Lewis whispered in his ear the secret of the great Australian game: "Just get the f--king footy." Wirrpanda recalls it with a grin.

Big Ash Hansen, the Eagles' towering centre half-forward, says Wirrpanda is "the funniest bloke at the club". I don't see too much of his humour, maybe because the discussion moves quickly to politics.

Matera also spoke to Wirrpanda before his first game. He gave him much the same advice as Lewis - "just be natural". But Matera gave him a second piece of advice that was to prove no less enduring. It

was customary for Melbourne crowds to boo Matera. He told Wirrpanda it didn't bother him. Why? "Because," said Matera, "the money's in the bank."

After 13 years in the AFL, with the assistance of an astute manager, David Wirrpanda owns a string of commercial properties in Perth. Later, when I meet Mike McNulty, a representative of Deloitte, the financial consultancy firm that is a partner in the David Wirrpanda Foundation, he tells me Wirrpanda is well connected in the business world. The footballer has a trust fund to assist members of his family and says he could retire now if he wished.

So how good a player has Wirrpanda been? Eagles chief Trevor Nesbitt says "very good". Wirrpanda went to West Coast as a forward, but there was no getting past Lewis and Brett Heady and his first opportunity came in defence with the retirement of David Hart. Has anyone ever played the back pocket as creatively as Wirrpanda? I once heard Michael Voss say that even when the Brisbane Lions were at their imperial best they never worked out a way to stop Wirrpanda running free from defence.

My impression of the 2005 grand final, which Nesbitt confirms, is that Wirrpanda was, with Chris Judd, the Eagles' best player until he was coat-hangered by Sydney's Barry Hall. He may have played well after the incident but he was no longer dominant. Gordon Cole, a former ATSIIC commissioner, is also on the board of the David Wirrpanda Foundation. His memory of the incident with Hall was that Wirrpanda "got straight back up". He says there's a toughness in Wirrpanda you don't see. I saw it when he talked politics.

Before the 2006 grand final, I was in the Eagles' rooms for their pre-match warm-up. It seemed to me that Wirrpanda was one of the players who set the tempo of the exercise with his voice. From being one of the quietest players, he suddenly became the loudest. The second grand final is the most vivid in his mind. He'd been injured. There was a risk in him playing. If he failed, he not only failed the team, but also the player who would otherwise have had his position, Jamie Graham. In the event, he played with Graham's number written on his hand.

When I visited the foundation in late December, Wirrpanda, known to the fans as Wirra, had slipped away between training sessions to speak to a group of Nyungah kids from a primary school south of Perth who are members of the "Wirra club". Membership of the club is dependent on school attendance. In the morning, there was a lot of sport. In the afternoon, when the mood was more subdued, they worked on computers. When Wirrpanda spoke to them his voice was gentle, almost sing-song. It was all about being relaxed here, he said, and getting to know one another as friends. People on television such as himself were only people. He stressed the importance of going to school.

I ask Mike McNulty whether the Wirrpanda Foundation's programs work. "Oh yes," he says. "They work." Wirrpanda says his aim is to make change slowly, from the ground up. I check the word "slowly". Oh yes, he's sure about that.

Wirrpanda has already been approached by the Labor Party to enter politics. When Chinese President Hu Jintao recently visited Perth, Wirrpanda was invited by the State Government to meet him. Two months ago, The Bulletin magazine ranked Wirrpanda at No. 9 in a list of the 10 most significant

indigenous people in Australia. He's a young man going somewhere and he knows where that is. "I'm going to take this foundation national. I will do whatever it takes to get the support." He understands this means raising his profile outside Western Australia and, to this end, he has started doing some television work, including Snapshots for Channel Nine.

Gordon Cole, the former ATSIIC commissioner for the Nyunga people of the Perth metropolitan area, has been a mentor for Wirrpanda during his years in Perth, having been contacted by Wirrpanda's brother, Fletcher, to fill the role. Wirrpanda would relax before big Perth games at Cole's house, playing with his children. Cole says the big step Wirrpanda has yet to take in his public life is learning to say no.

In another eight games, Wirrpanda will play his 200th and become a life member of the AFL. When I ask how long he'll play on for, he says three or four years. Someone who knows him a lot better says I got him on a good day. Whenever the end does come, however, he says he won't be like some other AFL players he's seen who have fought for every last game. He'll be happy to let the next generation come through. Maybe that's because he knows he has a future outside football.

DAVID WIRRPANDA

BORN August 3, 1979, Melbourne.

EDUCATED Worowa College, Healesville.

CAREER Recruited by West Coast Eagles from Healesville/Eastern Rangers under 18s; debuted for West Coast 1996, aged 17; All- Australian 2005, premiership player 2006.

2005 David Wirrpanda Foundation launched to promote "strong role models and healthy choices to indigenous children".