




More Than a Name: The Importance of Cultural Names and Identity in Professional Sport

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Abstract

Indigenous athletes have long been subject to racism throughout sporting systems. Such examples include being racially abused by opposition athletes and fans. For Indigenous peoples, their names carry their identity and history of generations; connecting them to their ancestors. Sadly, in some instances their esteemed names and identities have been bastardised intentionally. One incident includes an influential sport commentator making fun of an Indigenous name on air. Her inability to pronounce Indigenous names and their defensive mechanism of making fun of them, has added to the ongoing mistreatment of Indigenous athletes in sport. Another incident involving a highly regarded, sport coach, echoed racist behaviour by renaming an Indigenous athlete in his new team; because he did not want to learn how to pronounce his name, a name given to the athlete by his parents and gifted by his tūpuna (ancestors). These high profile examples demonstrate an ignorance to properly acknowledge the demographic who make up almost half of the playing contracts in this sport. This article will draw from the research of two Indigenous sport academics to address the importance of Indigenous identity for athletes as well as pushing-back against racism in professional sport. We advocate for the inclusion of our ancestral wisdom and the honouring of our names be etched in the fabric of professional sport.

Keywords Indigenous · Polynesian · Māori · Pasifika · Sport · Rugby league

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1 Introduction

Racism in sport has been a focus of much research (Bennett & King 2021; Chappell 2012; Coakley 2015, 2021; Kahi 2017; Farrington et al. 2017; Hylton 2008; Tatz 1995). The role of identity in sport also forms a strong, and still developing, body of scholarship (Adair & Rowe 2010; Borell 2015; Enari & Keung 2024; Hawkes 2018; Hokowhitu 2004; James 1963). While the growth in the field of scholarship about race and identity in sport suggests a greater understanding, and awareness, of the impacts of racism and the erasure of identity; outside the confines of academic conversations, the reality is that racism in sport is still prevalent.

Rugby league provides a particular microcosm of the sporting world that relies significantly on the labour of ethnic minorities for its own survival. In Australia close to 50% of top tier contracts in the National Rugby League (NRL) competition are held by Polynesian (Māori and Pasifika) athletes (Borell 2022; Snape, 2024). Since the late 1980s-early 1990s professional rugby league contracts in the NRL has provided pathways of social mobility for young Polynesian men who migrate to Australia to play in the world's premier rugby league competition (Borell 2022; Hawkes 2019; Lakisa 2020). As the number of Polynesian men who play, professionally, in the NRL continues to trend upward, so too does the need for recognition of their identities, whakapapa (genealogy), culture, and heritage (Enari & Keung 2022).

Rugby league has historically been enthusiastically embraced by the working classes. Because rugby league has offered an accessible means of social mobility for Māori and Pacific athletes over the last three decades, there has been significant growth of the sport in the South Pacific. From the Anglo working class origins of the sport, rugby league has become a global sporting commodity and the NRL in Australia is the largest domestic competition. In recent years, this can be directly connected to the contributions of Polynesian athletes and their ability to enthral spectators in stadiums and on couches around the world (Borell 2022; Hawkes 2019; Lakisa 2020).

Lakisa et al. (2014) note that “the Pasifika diaspora in Australia is making an indelible imprint on the sport of rugby league” (p. 347). Their work highlights both the growing number of Polynesian and Melanesian athletes, and the influence of their culture and style of play on the NRL. Lakisa et al. (2014) also highlight outward labour migration of athletic talent from the Pacific, referred to as ‘The Brawn Drain’ as a contributing factor to the “Polynesianisation” of modern rugby league. That is, professional rugby league, specifically the NRL competition, is becoming increasingly Polynesian as a product. This can also be highlighted by the number of Polynesian women who prop up the NRLW competition also being close to 50% (Snape 2024).

Dr Hawkes (2018) extends our understanding of the role of Polynesian athletes in the development of professional rugby league by acknowledging that “Rugby league is fast becoming a Pasifika majority-played sport in Australia” (p. 327). This continuing growth of Polynesian numbers in professional rugby league is indicative of many phenomena: social mobility; inclusivity; and familial connection to, and through, the wider sporting landscape of rugby league. Again, it is important to acknowledge the importance of the Polynesian athlete to the development of modern rugby league as both a sport and as a showcase of culture and athleticism.

According to Panapa and Phillips (2014) rugby league in Australia has become a socially dynamic space, and the Polynesian athlete's emergence signifies the sport's continued social diversification. While the player base has continued to diversify, the power structures (club owners, management, coaches etc.) within the sport remain primarily Anglo-Saxon (Borell 2022). As a result of the changing demographic make-up of rugby league athletes, and the relatively static, unchanged, nature of the power structures that inform and control the code, it could be suggested that disconnection between player and organisation may exist.

It is apparent to us as Polynesian academics in the sociology of sport that, despite their successes and contributions to the sport on and off the field, Polynesian athletes remain viewed as a commodity; a commodity to be consumed by media and fans alike as little more than a brown body built for physical contact (Borell 2022). The premise that Polynesian athletes have become racialised sporting bodies within the global sport of rugby league requires further consideration and inquiry. It is for these reasons that it is time that these young men and their heritage are respected and honoured accordingly. Without these young men and their ancient bloodlines of heritage and culture, the NRL simply does not exist the way that it does in 2024.

This article seeks to examine the disregard of the identities and heritage of the athletes who make up a significant portion of the on-field 'talent'. By illuminating the importance of cultural identity we will draw attention to two incidents of blatant racism that were minimised as casual racism or completely dismissed as 'harmless fun' and 'inside jokes'. By addressing the ongoing influence of racism in the NRL we will also identify the problematic assumptions of Polynesian men in physical contact sports such as rugby league. This article will draw from the research of two Polynesian academics to better understand the complexities of Polynesian identities in rugby league.

2 Contextualising Racism in Sport Through Two Examples

Racism in sport is not new, in fact, racism has an extensive history in these spaces from racist slurs from the crowd and opponents (Enari & Keung 2024; Farrington et al. 2017; Kahi 2017; Oshiro et al. 2021). And, while some might suggest that sport and politics should not be mentioned in the same sentence it is undeniable that sport is a political sphere. In Aotearoa we have a proud history of using sport as a political vehicle. 1981 is a significant year for us (in Aotearoa); this is the year that large portions of the nation took to the streets to oppose the 1981 South African Springbok rugby tour based on their discrimination against coloured and Indigenous athletes. We have watched as Colin Kaepernick took a knee in 2016 to make "a political statement against racialized oppression and police brutality carried out against people of color in the USA" (Boykoff & Carrington 2020, p. 829) sparking a global political movement among black, and marginalised, athletes. This year, the wāhine (women) of the Hurricanes Pōua Super Rugby Aupiki team caused a sense of outrage (among the ignorant) when adapting their haka (traditional Māori chant or war cry) to call-out the current government over what they perceived as kakī whero (red neck) behaviours. Sport is political and athletes are human.

Globally, various forms of racism have been directed at athletes. With the rise of social media the world has unprecedented access to athletes and this also means athletes now face unprecedented levels of vitriol from fans (Oshiro, et al. 2021). While the internet is a space where racism and other forms of denigration can be expected (though they should never be accepted) the same can not be said for mainstream sport media.

Mainstream sport media can have a significant influence on how people perceive athletes (for better or worse) and can further entrench hegemonic narratives of athlete identities (Kahi 2017). People employed in mainstream media, as well as staff employed in sporting organisations have an obligation to protect the identities of athletes and should be held accountable whenever they allow, or acquiesce, racism at any level.

To provide context, we will showcase two incidents where people who are employed with positions of power in the professional rugby league world exhibited racist behaviour through their inability to respect the cultures of Polynesian athletes by attempting to pronounce their names. One, a sport media commentator and personality, the other a world renowned ‘super coach’.

Now, it is worth noting that we do not expect perfection from anglo-Australian and non-Māori or non-Pasifika New Zealand commentators. However, it should be stated that a genuine effort to understand the importance of whakapapa/gafa (genealogy) and identity that are maintained through the names that represent our iwi (tribes), hapū (sub tribes), whānau/‘āiga (family) and villages through an attempt to pronounce these correctly is basic human decency. Coaches, however, are tasked with forging genuine relationships with their athletes and we do feel that they should be held accountable for any intentional attack on an athletes’ identity. We do not have the scope in this paper to unpack in detail the importance of identity for Polynesian peoples, however there is an abundance of literature that provides a compelling narrative (Anae 1997, 2002; Enari & Haua 2021; Franklin 2003; George & Rodriguez 2009; Matika et al. 2021).

3 Incident One: Erin Molan’s ‘Inside Joke’

Channel 9’s rugby league personality Erin Molan’s ‘hooka looka mooka’ comments when referring to Pasifika rugby league players was nothing short of racism (*Pacific Community reeling from NRL host’s racist comments* | RNZ). To purposefully (mis)pronounce (with a mocking accent) Pasifika names is not only poor taste, but mirrors how much race relations work still needs to be done.

Molan became a celebrity through her television roles in the greater rugby league landscape. Initially a reporter for the Footy Show (a weekly rugby league show that itself had its fair share of cringe worthy content), Molan was promoted to hosting the show as all aspects of the game moved to demonstrate diversity, inclusivity and equality. She is also tasked with interviewing players during and after games and providing weekly commentary and analysis of Australia’s premier winter code on television and radio.

We recognise that being a woman in this environment would certainly present challenges. Rugby league doesn't have the cleanest record with regard to gender equality; gender inclusivity; and sexual abuse and there is existing research has exposed the extent to which women suffer at the hands of rugby league playing men in Australia (Packard Hill & Fuller 2018). While there has been growth in female athletes participating in the sport and in rugby league media, women are still underrepresented in most other facets of rugby league (Hotham 2023). We write this piece with respect for her ability to transcend boundaries in one space and in absolute bewilderment at her ignorance in another.

Although Pasifika people's presence and cultures are interwoven in the Australian fabric, we still face many race issues (Enari & Taula 2022; McGavin 2014; Taito 2022). Pacific people are 1.6% of the total Australian population, but make up over 45% of the professional rugby league male player population and over 48% of the professional female cohort (Gerace et al. 2023; Snape 2024). What is concerning is people like her continue to portray us to mainstream society as exotic savages, brown entertainers and primitive immigrants.

With such a strong presence of Māori and Pasifika athletes contributing to the commercial success of the game (Borell 2012, 2022; Hawkes 2018; Lakisa 2020), it is difficult to see how it could be acceptable to intentionally take away from someone's mana (authority, prestige) by denigrating their name and their identity to get some laughs on live radio. Molan, referring to a Pasifika rugby league player used "hooka looka mooka hooka fooka" in place of his name; Haumole Olakau'atu. Having been criticised for this by Pasifika players and academics (Borell 2020; Young 2020), her response was that it was an 'inside joke'. This particular 'inside joke' prompted some Pasifika athletes, such as Tino Junior Poluleuligaga, to call on others to boycott interviews with Molan at the time (YahooSport, 8 June, 2020). Martin Taupau (Manly Sea Eagles, New Zealand Kiwis and Toa Samoa representative) spoke out in 2020 on the disrespect of her actions stating that this mockery of Pasifika identity is "disgraceful" and that "My grandfather would be tossing in his grave in anger!" (Young 2020).

4 Incident Two: Wayne Bennetts 'casual' Racism

In May 2023 news agency's revealed that rugby league 'super coach' Wayne Bennett had 'struggled' with the pronunciation of one of his athletes' names (Johannsen 2023). The athlete, Valynce Te Whare, was then subjected to having his name and identity erased when the coach referred to him as Val Smith. "I've had to rename him. There's no way you can get that surname out in one mouthful, so he is known as Val Smith around here" (Stuff, May 2023).

Having coached professional rugby league since 1987 and winning numerous premierships with many clubs, as well coaching state and national teams (including Australia, New Zealand and England) to success, Bennetts resume is unmatched in the sport. And, it is apparent that Bennett's position as a highly regarded coach has afforded him certain graces in regard to his 'casual' racism.

Bennetts words were considered by some apologists as charming and fun. However, the inability to pronounce somebody's name is not an excuse to change it. In

fact, it is a signal to do better, and as a coach it is your responsibility to uphold your players dignity through, at the very least, attempting to say their name properly. Anyone who has coached in the NRL since the late 1980s would be cognisant of the shifting demographic of athletes who make the sport such a successful commercial entity. Teams that Bennet has coached (including the 2008 World Cup winning New Zealand Kiwis) have increasingly been made up of Māori and Pasifika athletes. With close to 40 years of experience engaging with this body of athletes, there is little excuse for the disregard shown in this example for the identity and culture of a young man under the tutelage and care of such a high profile coach. Like the Erin Molan example above, the idea that racism can be interchanged with humour demonstrates an innate lack of respect for the identity of the athletes without whom the NRL would not be the sporting platform that it is. As noted above, close to 50% of the top tier of contracted athletes in the NRL have Māori or Pasifika heritage. To belittle the identity of one, is to belittle all, as many of these athletes are genealogically and ancestrally connected to one another and their wider communities.

Where the Molan example represents a story of disrespect and ignorance, having such a highly revered coach follow this trend and make a mockery of identity is all of those things, as well as a blatant abuse of power. Young athletes are not likely to challenge the behaviours of their coach, especially if they are yet to debut in first grade. What can be seen here is a distinct power imbalance where a young athlete has been forced to accept his name and identity being erased while his coach has used his disproportionate power advantage to save himself the embarrassment of mis-pronouncing a name he had no intention of learning.

In Māori and Pasifika cultures, our name defines us. It provides much knowledge; who our ancestors are, what iwi, hapū, ‘aiga or village we come from. For many of us, our name is far more important than our job title or the position we hold in society. This is not the first racial incident involving Pasifika people in Australian rugby league, as former Pasifika players have spoken out on the racial vilification they received both on and off the field (Lakisa et al. 2019).

The Australian government has a well-documented history of prejudice against Pasifika people. The White Australia Policy discouraged migration from the islands between 1901 and 1973 (Lee 2009). Upon arrival many were labelled unqualified, unexperienced and only able to work as unskilled labour (Vasta 2004). A 1971 Australian cabinet publicly described Pasifika people as too “unsophisticated and unsuited” to live among white society (Hamer 2014). Degrading public comments by the Government are as recent as 2019, some 49 years later. The Deputy Prime Minister publicly stated that Pacific Island people would survive climate change when they “come here and pick our fruit”.

5 Discussion

As Māori and Pasifika athletes make up close to 50% of the NRL athlete roster, we will not stand for the mockery of our names and the erasure of our cultures. These statistics show that in fact, Māori and Pasifika athletes make the game what it is today. The inability of the NRL to adapt to the player majority and their cultural identity is

emblematic of an unwillingness to accept a transition of power from organisation to athlete (Borell 2022). It also shows these organisations are happy to have Māori and Pasifika athletes as ‘athlete labour’ and ‘sweat labour’ without dignity for their name.

The status quo (read: white dominance and power over a sport increasingly represented by brown bodies) is what serves to protect the racialisation of sporting bodies. These actions of racialisation in the sporting space need to stop, especially from those who are in positions of power. It is this protection that allowed Erin Molan, and Wayne Bennett, to feel comfortable enough to publically espouse their racist rhetoric, under the guise of humour and familiarity. Kahi (2017) highlights sport media as a site of identity construction. More specifically he suggests “Media representations are understood to be central in constructing and reproducing race logic.” (Kahi 2017, p. 34). The idea that media representations can construct an athlete’s identity is a problematic though not inaccurate one.

In this case, sport has provided a space for racism to develop (Kahi 2017). When we watch sports, we can now see our Indigenous athletes doing well on the field. However, the sporting environment they are in is still very Western and palagi in nature. Many of our Māori & Pasifika athletes are expected to perform during game time, inside a system that doesn’t always understand (or want to understand) our cultures and values (Keung & Enari 2022). Sadly, the Molan and Bennetts incidents are not the only time Pacific athletes have been dehumanised by their non Māori & Pasifika managers and coaches. As Māori and Pacific people who happen to be researchers, we ourselves have seen and been victim to this colonial rhetoric within our sport teams.

Kahi (2017) suggests that accomplishments and upward social mobility afforded to some athletes of colour can provide a platform for racist responses to their success. That is, Māori and Pasifika athletes may be victims due to their sporting success. This success can be met with unwarranted and disparaging commentary about the identities and stereotypes of Polynesian athletes within sporting systems (Borell 2016; Grainger 2009; Manarpaac 2014; Saluga Jr 2018).

We also see the unwillingness of those in sporting systems to adapt as a reflection of racism within the sporting organisation itself. That is, the acceptance of ‘casual’ or ‘low level’ racism within the sport may be representative of larger problems in the sporting world. Coaches, and coaching staff, specifically have a duty of care to protect athletes, not to exploit or denigrate them. The relationships that develop between athletes and coaches have been referred to as relationships of fostered control and fostered belonging (Battochio et al. 2013). Fostered control is often grounded in a coach’s, or coaches, efforts to build confidence in professional athletes; fostered belonging is where coaches have a shared cultural background, or efforts are made to understand the cultural background of the athlete (Borell 2022). For Bennett to undermine the whakapapa of Valynce Te Whare, and to erase his identity the way he did is below the standard required of any professional coach.

Literature suggests that athletes of colour are more likely to be described as “predominantly physical, to the detriment of intellectual attributes.” (Kahi, p. 35). Kahi (2017) also highlights sport media as a site of identity construction. More specifically he suggests “Media representations are understood to be central in constructing and reproducing race logic.” (Kahi 2017, p. 34). The idea that media representations can

construct an athlete's identity is problematic and serves to fuel false perceptions of particular identity groupings.

These false beliefs are not only insulting, but also disregard the intellectual contribution of Pacific athletes in sport spaces. Some examples include former Pasifika athletes who have influenced sporting organisations such as former World Champion shot putter, Tongan Dame Valerie Adams who now sits on the Sport New Zealand board, Former Black Ferns Captain, Māori Dame Professor Farrah Palmer who is now on the New Zealand Rugby board and former Samoa Football player turned, Chief Womens Football Officer Dame Sarai Bareman (Enari & Keung 2024).

As the global Indigenous movement of Decolonisation and Indigenisation occurs, Indigenous peoples and their allies will no longer tolerate cultural disrespect. Luckily, there is an ongoing movement to counter racism in sport. Such initiatives include the addition of Moana Pasifika in Super Rugby and the ongoing push to change eligibility rules, by sporting stars such as Ardie Savea, Sonny Bill Williams and Daniel Leo. Initiatives like these, all add to the awakening of Māori & Pasifika taking ownership of our sporting narratives and futures. There is also a growing presence of Māori and Pasifika in contemporary sport media. In rugby league media the representation of Māori and Pasifika voice is a necessary and welcome addition to the status quo.

The status quo has served to protect the racialisation of sporting bodies. It is this protection that allowed Erin Molan and Wayne Bennett to feel comfortable enough to publically espouse their racist rhetoric, under the guise of humour and familiarity.

6 Moving Forward

There is growing critical mass among Polynesian communities, academics and allies, pushing for better inclusion and treatment of Polynesian athletes in the NRL. As Indigenous people and allies, we must continuously challenge the status quo, or we will continually be passive workers and victims of racism in the sports space. We believe everyone can make this space better for Māori and Pacific, from taking the time to learning the meanings of Māori and Pacific names, to calling out instances of racism there and then (Enari & Keung 2023; Keung & Enari 2022). Sending a strong message that ignorance has no space in sporting spaces.

Commentators, coaches and anyone who engages with Polynesian athletes must respect and try to pronounce Polynesian names correctly, especially since they make up a large portion of the NRL with a projected further increase. To not do so is not only cultural ignorance, but a sheer inability for the commentator to do their job correctly and a disregard for one's dignified existence. Interestingly, we also believe that this should extend beyond merely, commentators pronouncing our names correctly. We also demand that more Polynesians become sport commentators and that our languages are included more. We acknowledge this movement is occurring with commentators such as Sonny Bill Williams, and the use of Samoan and Māori words by athletes and Polynesian commentators and athletes during prime time games. We have seen efforts from Māori media such as Whakaata Māori to broadcast games fully in te reo Māori. As Polynesian academics we support these initiatives, we ask

you to do the same. We believe in the survival of our names, and our cultures within sport. We ask that this be maintained. Ngā mihi and alofa atu.

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