

Racial abuse is rife in junior sports—and little is being done to address it

June 14 2019, by Karen Farquharson, Ramon Spaaij And Ruth Jeanes



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The AFL and its clubs have finally [issued an apology](#) to two-time Brownlow Medallist Adam Goodes for their handling of the relentless racist booing that marred his last year of football in 2015. This apology is welcome, though certainly overdue.

Despite its failures to adequately address Goodes' situation at the time—and its subsequent delay in apologising—the AFL has actually been considered a leader in Australian sport for its efforts to stamp out [racism](#) among players.

The league enacted [racial vilification policies](#) in 1995 [in response to incidents of racial vilification](#) during games. Since then, these policies have been very effective in eliminating racial abuse on the field, though they have not had the same impact on taunts from spectators, as Goodes' experience clearly shows.

The key element that works is that players now receive meaningful penalties for racial abuse: fines, suspensions, and being publicly named as perpetrators. The policy shifts the focus from the player who is the victim of the racism to the player who perpetrates it.

The AFL's approach to managing racial vilification has been adopted throughout Australian sport, including at the community level.

But it may be surprising to hear that these efforts to tackle racism on the field have been largely ineffective in junior sport. And it is at junior sport level where children learn the norms, values and practices around what is and is not acceptable behavior.

Racial abuse rife in junior sports

We recently conducted an [in-depth study of how junior sports clubs manage diversity](#). Our study conducted over 100 interviews and 450

surveys with players, coaches, parents and committee members from nine community sports clubs across five sports in Victoria. One of the types of diversity that we studied was ethnic or cultural diversity.

[Our analysis](#) found that racial vilification was a common occurrence among players in junior sports, as well as with spectators. Our interview data indicates that it is occurring across most sports and among both boys and girls, with non-white children being the targets of most abuse.

For example, one club official at a junior [football](#) club said to us:

"Our Sudanese boys get vilified every second to third week, at least. "

Another junior football club told us:

"Some of our Muslim kids are regularly vilified but they've learned to shrug and move on. "

While all the clubs we surveyed had an official process for handling racial abuse—similar to the one developed for players in the AFL—it was almost never utilised.

Instead, clubs preferred to use informal means to address the incidents, such as coaches or managers speaking to their counterparts on the other team during a match, or [club](#) presidents doing the same after a match.

Sometimes, children experiencing racial abuse were pulled out of the match for their own protection. The reason the clubs gave us: the children who were vilified were unlikely to receive a positive outcome from making a formal complaint.

This is because complaints never led to consequences for abusers, only for the abused.

Tolerance for racist behavior in sport

Academic [research into denial of racism](#) in Australia has found that many people fear speaking out against racial incidents because they are likely to be punished for doing so.

This was certainly the case for Goodes, whose troubles began when he complained of being [racially vilified](#) by a 13-year-old girl during a football match in 2013. and intensified when he focused attention on racism after being named [Australian of the Year](#) in 2014.

Not only was Goodes systematically booed the following season for his efforts to speak out against racism, the [lack of response from the AFL](#) at the time reinforced the message that such acts are acceptable. There have been no consequences for the fans who vilified Goodes, or for those in the league who tacitly supported the booing by not coming out against it.

Though policies have been enacted by the AFL and other sports leagues to tackle racism on the field, there's still the broader cultural problem of racial vilification from spectators—and on [social media](#). This culture is maintained through a tolerance for racism that begins in junior sport.

What can be done to fix the problem

We would argue that the process for addressing racial vilification in junior sport, as it stands, is ineffective. So how do we fix the problem? Our study identified some actions that could work.

According to our interviews, the most effective way to address racist taunts by players was for their own teammates to call it out. In more extreme cases, some of the teams we surveyed refused to continue the match if a player was being vilified. This had an immediate effect—the racist behavior stopped and didn't start again.

It would also be effective for officials to act against perpetrators when they see racial abuse happening, either by ejecting players from the game or spectators from the field. According to our research, this is not a step that officials take now to handle such incidents.

As Goodes' experience in the AFL illustrates, there needs to be consequences for those who engage in racial abuse in sport, particularly at the junior level where attitudes are learned and ingrained.

As it stands, the only ones negatively impacted by racial [abuse](#) in junior sport are the victims. If we want a sporting landscape where all are welcome and enabled to thrive, this is unacceptable.

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