

When Australian Rules Football, now AFL, arrived in Alice Springs, it became an immediate and significant influence on the town's social interactions. Its development has continued to shape and mirror the changing dynamics of the town and region over time.

The sport would become particularly important for the region's Indigenous population, whose young men would play the game with an instinctive natural flair, athleticism and skill that may well have been generationally inspired by their own pre-settlement ball kicking sport "marn grook."

Early settlers had observed local Indigenous men all around the continent engaging in what appeared to be highly organized games. The games featured the kicking and catching of a stuffed ball bound in possum or kangaroo skin. A Warlpiri version known as "pultja" was among those noted.

The first organized games of AFL in Alice Springs coincided with the town's population boom during World War 2. A large military presence more than doubled the population, putting it in excess of 2,000 people. Those initial AFL games were played between Army, RAAF and Transport Corps personnel.

The establishment of the local AFL League in 1947 saw the formation of three clubs representing the main employment and residential backgrounds of their players. *Federal* players were drawn from the federal government and banking employee sector. *Rovers* players were mainly transport and infrastructure workers. *Pioneer* players were local Indigenous men of mixed bloodlines, referred to at the time as half-castes.

This competition became one of the town's major weekly social events through the winter months, particularly for families associated with the *Pioneer* football club. *Pioneer* has developed a multi-generational history beginning with the families involved as players and supporters in its formative years.

The same surnames from the club's early years still feature prominently on today's team sheets with sons, grandsons and great grandsons following in their elders' footsteps.

The growing army of family supporters that would gather to watch *Pioneer* over the years usually had cause to be happy and proud of their team, with the club becoming the dominant force in the competition and eventually producing several local heroes that made it to the top level.

Darryl White, Lachlan Ross, Fred Campbell, Matt Campbell, Richard Cole and Curtly Hampton were all second and third generation *Pioneer* players and their AFL careers have been a great source of pride for their club and families.

The league expanded to match the town's population growth through the 1960's. The addition of a Reserves competition and the inclusion of nearby Indigenous community Amoonguna (later known as *South*) reflected the popularity of the game among local young Indigenous men. A fifth club named Melanka (later *West*) was included in the early 1970's as the population reached 9,000.

*South* would develop a similar family culture to that of *Pioneer* and through the 1970's, 80's and 90's, meetings between the two were accompanied by huge gatherings of the families involved with each club. A fierce on-field rivalry developed.

A player's club allegiance was determined before birth. You either grew up in a *Pioneer* or *South* family. With the introduction and growth of AFLW over the last decade, those family connections now extend to daughters and granddaughters playing for the same club.

The rivalry generated its own traditions. The green and gold *Pioneer Eagles* supporters congregated on the "Pioneer Hill" at the northern end of Traeger Park. The blue and white *South Kangaroos* fans gathered on the Gap Road side of the ground.

The coin toss became irrelevant as both teams would choose opposite ends from their supporters to start the game in order to kick toward their fans in the last quarter.

Like *Pioneer*, *South's* family culture would also produce talent that would play in the big league. Three brothers; Greg, Gilbert and Adrian McAdam became AFL heroes.

As the town grew and motor vehicle transport became more readily accessible, Indigenous men from the remote communities surrounding Alice began to make their way into the competition on an individual basis.

In the 1980's the remote communities began playing regularly in Alice Springs, firstly in the Easter Lightning Carnival and then in their own competition. The passion and commitment these communities devote towards their football clubs is unmatched anywhere in the country.

After initially being restricted to playing only internal match ups and sports weekends on the hard and dusty Central Desert footy grounds out bush, the opportunity to play on the lush green grass of Traeger Park (the "MCG of the Bush"), was eagerly embraced by players and supporters.

The Easter Carnival would become a massive event, attracting teams from across the wider Central Australian region and from across the Indigenous nations. From Kintore in the far west, down to the APY Lands in the south, and north through the Barkly region up to the Big Rivers districts surrounding Katherine.

With anywhere between 25 to 35 local and visiting teams, each usually accompanied by a strong family supporter base, the Easter Carnival would see Traeger Park host one of the biggest, if not the biggest, annual Indigenous family gatherings in the region.

Massive crowds at Traeger Park are also a feature when the bush competition finals in Alice come around. The communities involved empty for the day as almost everyone heads into town to support their teams.

The streets of Alice become busy with cars adorned in club colours, streamers, stickers and hand painted decorations that include family player names and numbers.

Like *Pioneer* and then *South* have done over the previous decades, many remote communities have produced their own stars to play in the big league such as Warlpiri cousins Liam Jurrah from Yuendumu and Liam Patrick from Lajamanu..

Outside of the town-based competition, most communities host an annual sports weekend that attracts teams from throughout the region to battle it out on the dusty dirt ovals over two or three days. These weekends have become major social events between bush communities and they support the strong family ties that exist between them.

The impact of AFL in the region's remote communities is often intertwined with the sport at the highest level. For many, AFL club support is tied to the same jumper and emblem as the local team. The majority of people in Yuendumu follow the black and white Magpie connection to Collingwood. Ntaria (Hermannsburg) are linked to Western Bulldogs through their Western Aranda Bulldogs identity.

It is a similar scenario with the Nyirripi Demons and Melbourne Demons and that close association now features annually on AFL live telecasts of Melbourne games in Alice. Almost the entire Nyirripi community attends, gathering together as a red and blue cheer squad of flag and streamer waving Demon barrackers.

AFL also features prominently in the daily dress code in the remote communities with local and AFL club jumpers, polo shirts, baseball caps, beanies and hoodies popular fashion choices.

Nicknamed stars such as “Buddy” (Lance Franklin), “Nic Nat” (Nic Natanui), “Dusty” (Dustin Martin), and “Danger” (Patrick Dangerfield) are spoken of reverently in daily discussions between young and old.

The passionate support for AFL and the admiration bestowed upon the heroes of the game has infiltrated its way into all aspects of remote community life, including the artistic expressions of local Indigenous artists, as highlighted by the Footy Show exhibition, with the sports superstars and club allegiances featuring prominently.

While providing an opportunity for the region’s young Indigenous men, and now women as well, to showcase their sporting prowess, the sport has also provided one of the main avenues through which families and communities across the region have regularly gathered together.

Local Indigenous family and community aspirations, pride, opportunity, social interactions and history have undeniably been shaped by the sport of AFL over the past 75 years.

Of course, perhaps “marn grook” or “pultja” also played a similarly significant societal role in the lives of Central Australian Indigenous families and communities. Perhaps the current day devotion toward AFL is an extension of the community that has long been found in the sharing of games.