

## FITZROY STARS RESEARCH PAPER SUMMARY

Fitzroy Stars: summary of qualitative data associated with the health and wellbeing benefits of being involved in the club

### Health

Improving and maintaining individual physical health was a central theme. When comparing participating in team sport with doing individual physical activity, most players felt it was easier for them to partake in physical exercise in a team environment because of the peer support and camaraderie. Participants also recognised the positive physical health outcomes they could reap from playing with the 'Stars' in a community setting:

*"When you're out there on the track and they know you're struggling. It's good to hear, 'Carn bruz, keep pushing through' ... They do it in a way that is reinforcing and positive. They try to get you over the line, will you over the line rather than put you down. You're out there on a track with your mates and they're willing you and hoping for you and they're cheering you to do better."*

One participant described how players could link in with other health and wellbeing services, and the perceived impact this has on health as a result of playing with the Fitzroy Stars:

*"I think it's such a vehicle for other programs. You've got 70 Aboriginal men, 40 Aboriginal women and everyone else. There's the opportunity to do the health checks, which we do through the health service. There's the opportunity for smoking cessation program, all those other types of things. It's a place for people to go as well. Not everybody plays. People just like hanging around and being part of something. That improves their wellbeing too."*

A few players talked about the impact of the club on their social and emotional wellbeing. The club was regarded as a tool for stress relief and a place you could build your self-confidence:

*"Once you allow people to participate and they feel part of something, a club or community then that builds their self esteem. It strengthens their character and their self-esteem and provides that strong connection."*

*"When I was playing at [another local club], I'd say there was a lot of fear and a lot of anxiety. The expectations are on you to be something that you're really not. As an Aboriginal person playing for Fitzroy Stars I'm home."*

*"I see it as my outlet to debrief, let off steam let off a bit of frustration on the track. Catch up with good mates, good people, see your brothers, all that sort of stuff."*

Anecdotally, participation in an Aboriginal football team lessened the health impact of drinking on individual players.

*"I know a lot of players that would have succumbed a lot earlier if they didn't have football as their main passion, their main outlet for physical activity. Otherwise there would have been a lot of that [drinking alcohol]. A lot of that was going on and football actually intersected into that."*

### Cultural values and identity

Another collective theme emerged around cultural values and Aboriginal identity. Aspects of family and community representation were very clear in the interviews. Playing together with cousins, uncles and other young Aboriginal men also encouraged cultural bonding. One respondent talked about how:

*"... playing with your brothers is a bit more than just playing in a team. We're actually representing our people, we're representing our community, we're representing our families."*

Some participants strongly felt they represented the entire Aboriginal community, their families and tribes when they were out on the field. They conveyed a sense of cultural identity and pride when representing their family groups and saw football as an opportunity to contribute to their community:

*"It was the only time you get 40 warriors to represent your mob. That's how we always looked at it. It was our one chance to give something back. Our chance to prove that we were good at something. There wasn't much chance at proving how good you was any other way."*

Aside from other cultural activities happening at the club, football was also seen as a form of cultural expression:

*"It goes right back to the old days, when you first went out in the old days traditionally went out hunting kangaroos or the women chasing possums up the trees. They would make it an event. That's what football is, an event just like all the other cultural events that we did prior to the white man."*

### Community connection

The club was seen as somewhere to gather and connect with other Aboriginal community members. The participants considered the club as a gathering place and somewhere to catch-up, to connect with family and mates. One past player described how:

*"It was about community coming together, an opportunity for community to come together. For footballers to play for an Aboriginal football side which was a driving factor."*

Some respondents felt social and community aspects of participating were just as important to players as individual health benefits gained from participation:

*"It's good to catch up with the brother boys, man. Nothing better than catching up with the brothers and having a laugh. Then you get your own fitness out of it. Your own enjoyment. I love footy, man. Might get some who's more committed and more about getting themselves fit. Winning might be a high priority but then you might get a couple of others that just do it for the social scene. They're just as important as anyone those fellas."*

*"When I was living down home and I was in town I would go watch because I know everyone will be there. All the mob will be there. Catch up with family and friends and that."*

Participants felt a sense of ownership and belonging when playing with an Aboriginal sports team. The club was also a place they felt safe and comfortable.

*"At another club, I always felt just a number, just another number on the track. With here we felt like we belong, we belong to it, this is ours. There's a lot of ownership there for us. Playing at normal, other clubs there was never that feeling. With this club we felt like we're part of the ownership of it and we belong to it."*

*"I guess it just makes me feel at home being around people, my people and stuff. And especially not coming from Melbourne it's good to get to know the Aboriginal people from Victoria. Being accepted by them is one of the things I've always wanted. I don't want to live in another mob's country and not be accepted by the local people."*

### Conclusions

We conclude that participation in sporting environments with strong social networks, which reinforce cultural identity and pride, enhances the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal sports teams can potentially have a profound impact on the health of Aboriginal people, especially their players, by fostering a safe and culturally strengthening environment and encompassing a significant positive social hub for the Aboriginal community. In direct contrast with the positive impact of this

Aboriginal sports club, it is clear that racism and discrimination are major barriers for a safe and supportive environment for Aboriginal men to express their culture. It is clear that more education around the impact of racism needs to be provided to sporting organisations, supporters and sports participants from the grass roots to the elite level.

The results of the present study indicate that, in a population with frequently reported health problems, maintaining community cultural networks is still seen by Aboriginal men as a significant priority. The cultural and traditional values embedded in sport for Aboriginal people in Australia should not be underestimated.

Aboriginal identity and cultural heritage can be strengthened in Aboriginal sporting environments where inter-generational social and cultural networks flourish. Keeping social connections and continuing cultural activities and practices within families and local communities ensures that Aboriginal heritage, identities and knowledge are passed on to the next generation.

However, further investment is required from governments and funders to support Aboriginal community sports clubs that promote culturally inclusive and healthy active environments for Aboriginal people.

Further studies are needed on the links between social connection and physical, mental and emotional health benefits.

Understanding the complex and interrelated nature of social networks, particularly in densely connected communities of Aboriginal people, will assist the development of multifaceted strategies that better address Aboriginal health concerns.

Excerpts taken from: Thorpe, A, Anders, W, and Rowley, K, 2014. 'The community network: an Aboriginal community football club bringing people together', Australian Journal of Primary Health. Full article available from: <http://www.publish.csiro.au/paper/PY14051.htm>

### **Project Description**

This project was carried out by Alister Thorpe in partnership with The Fitzroy Stars Football Club. The aim of the project was to gather qualitative data about the impact of an Aboriginal sports club on its players and the wider Aboriginal community. Information was collected about how the Fitzroy Stars Football Club engages young Koori men and utilises opportunities for health promotion and how this affects behaviour change.

### **Method**

A Literature review was undertaken around Indigenous people and sports participation in relation to themes like social and physical health, access, social inclusion, and racism. Interviews and small focus groups were held with 9 current players and 5 past players of the Stars Football Club to collect information about the perceived social, emotional and physical well-being benefits to players, how the club engages young Aboriginal men and the impact of the club on the local Aboriginal community. Key officials from the Fitzroy Stars Football Club formed the Indigenous Community Advisory Group for the project and were consulted on the methods and provided support, advice and an understanding of the Indigenous community involved with the club.

### **Aims**

The aim of the research was to contribute to understanding about the effects of community and social sporting teams and environments on young Aboriginal males and identify some of the barriers and motivators to participation. Core questions of the project were:

- What impact does participation in an Aboriginal community sports club have on the physical, social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of its participants and the local Aboriginal community?
- What motivates participants? And What are the barriers and challenges?
- What are the physical, social, emotional and cultural benefits?
- How does it affect cultural values and identity?

### **Results**

The results of the interviews were largely consistent with the results of the literature review with common themes emerging around community and social connection, the importance of cultural values and identity and the impact of racism and discrimination.

A major finding from this research is that for Aboriginal people community health takes precedence over individual health. The social and community aspects of participating in an Aboriginal football team were more important to participants than individual health benefits gained from participation, however participants clearly still receive positive health outcomes. The Fitzroy Stars Football Club has a profound impact on the health of Aboriginal people, especially its players, by fostering a safe and culturally strengthening environment and encompassing a positive social hub for the Aboriginal community. The cultural and traditional values embedded in sport for Aboriginal people should not be underestimated. Aboriginal identity and cultural heritage can be strengthened in Aboriginal sporting environments where intergenerational social and cultural networks flourish.

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