

Gaps not closed: the divisions shown by Taylor Walker's racist comment



Taylor Walker won't play again this season.

By Jake Niall
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In 2016, after his teammate Eddie Betts was racially abused by supporters in a late-season showdown, Taylor Walker called his Port Adelaide counterpart Travis Boak.

Walker, then the captain of the Crows, suggested to Boak that something needed to be done to stomp on the racial abuse of the beloved Betts, who had a banana thrown at him by a Port fan.

Today, as Walker stands rightly condemned for his racist comment about North Adelaide and ex-St Kilda Indigenous player Robbie Young, it is hard to fathom how the same footballer who placed that call to Boak five years ago has inflicted such hurt to his Indigenous brethren.

The gap between that benign version of Taylor Walker and the one who made a racist comment about Young to teammate Matt Crouch is merely one of several divisions and chasms that have been laid bare by Walker's offensive remark.

The first and most significant rift, clearly, is between Walker and his club's five Indigenous players (four male and one female), who received a face-to-face apology from the embarrassed former skipper.

Walker had plenty at stake in making the apology. If those Indigenous teammates and the club's Indigenous staff felt they couldn't abide him at West Lakes, coach

Matthew Nicks and the club hierarchy would have little choice but to jettison Walker, regardless of his contract for 2022.

Nicks, who spoke with such sincerity and moral force in a Friday media conference, did not guarantee that the former captain would be playing on.

The onus put on those five Crows underscores how Indigenous footballers are forced into uncomfortable situations that are not visited on the white majority. "They're in a position now where they shouldn't have to be because of the colour of their skin," said Betts in a timely interview with *The Age*.

Consider, too, that those Indigenous teammates would face a potential whitelash or backlash - be it racist or misguided club tribalism - if they were seen to play in a role in Walker's exit.

The club official who reported the incident has chosen to remain anonymous. The club hasn't specified his motive for being incognito, but if you visit social media's sewers, you'll see there's a portion of fans (however unrepresentative) who blame him for tarnishing Walker.

Why would anyone pop their head up over that parapet?

That the official spoke up as he did is a measure of progress on racism. But that he doesn't wish to be identified is a measure of the limits of that progress.

The safe bet is that Walker will be retained, after public and private penance, though Nicks was wise to avoid any commitments.

A choked-up Nicks found the right words to address Walker's racist comment, which cannot be dismissed as "casual racism" - the term Crows board member and club great Mark Ricciuto deployed when commenting on his Adelaide radio program on *Triple M*.

"Casual" implies a lower level offence, a few stray words, rather than something more overt, let alone a comment ventilated, as Walker's was, in the open air at quarter-time at a SANFL game.

"This is a good lesson for everyone because there's a lot of casual racism in society and we laugh about it at times, but we probably don't realise how much damage it really does cause and we all need to learn from it," said Ricciuto.

Ricciuto's comment exposed, not quite a rift, but certainly a different outlook between him and Nicks.

Ricciuto spoke positively of Walker's remorse. Nicks, conversely, focused on the pain of the Walker's Indigenous teammates, plus his own ex-Swans team mates, Michael O'Loughlin and Adam Goodes.

And in the same week the Morrison government announced an upgraded version of the 'Closing the Gap' plan for Indigenous Australians, it became apparent that there was a considerable gap between the way the AFL players' own union view racism committed by a prominent footballer like Walker, and a member of the public.

The entire AFL universe, we media included - must consider whether it is right to apply one standard to the internet troll - "garbage", "disgraceful, cowardly" and "disgusting" - and another to those whom we know.

In their media statement attributed to chief executive Paul Marsh, the AFLPA said it was "extremely disappointed at the language used by...Taylor Walker."

The statement added: "Tex's language was damaging and divisive, and there is no excuse for it. We are very clear on this - racism is abhorrent and there is no room for it in our game."

Marsh said that Walker "has expressed his sincere and genuine remorse and has owned and apologised for his actions.



Eddie Betts and Taylor Walker walk out on to the field for a clash with the Saints in 2016.

"Tex is not only committed to learning from this, but to also make a positive difference."

The AFLPA president Patrick Dangerfield - admirably vigilant in his efforts to call out racism directed at players - tweeted a comment above Marsh's media statement: "There is no room for racism, we must all do better to educate ourselves and those around us".

Compare the temperate, measured comments about Walker's appalling remark to those that the AFLPA leadership made when Betts was abused online (yet again) by a troll in February of 2019.

Marsh tweeted on February 23 of 2019: "More disgraceful, cowardly, racist behaviour directed at one of our game's finest people. There is simply no excuse for this garbage. Our Indigenous players deserve much better."

Dangerfield tweeted one word above Marsh's comment, pointing below: "disgusting".

Marsh and Dangerfield were right to condemn the trolls in strong language. But they - and the entire AFL universe, we media included - must consider whether it is right to apply one standard to the internet troll - "garbage", "disgraceful, cowardly" and "disgusting" - and another to those whom we know.

Walker's ill-chosen words have had a far greater impact upon Indigenous players and people, on the Crows, and the game than anything put forth by a crude internet racist. Walker, as Nicks observed, has had significant education on racism.

The Players Association were encouraged by their Indigenous players to call out racism, especially online, at a pre-season Indigenous players' camp in 2019. Marsh and Dangerfield responded appropriately and took up the cudgels on behalf of their Indigenous members.

This is not a selective calling out of a calling out. *The Age* and much of the fourth estate have also failed - too often - to apply the same standards to our own backyard, as we do to those whom we report on.

It is noteworthy that Betts - in such demand, given his credibility and relationship with Walker - chose to speak, not with any of the legion of AFL accredited media, but with *The Age's* first Indigenous reporter hired in decades.

Of the many gaps that Walker's comment exposed, the most troubling remains this: The sheer paucity of non-players - coaches, chief executives, recruiters and, yes, footy media - who have lived experience of racism.