

The great Australian: Pastor Sir Doug Nicholls

By Michael Winkler

Two articles on the great Pastor Doug, the first written in 2008 for afl.com.au and focusing on his football career; the second written in 2002 and based on the childhood memories of his daughters.

Who is the greatest man to ever play league football?

There are some worthy contenders. Fighter pilot and Melbourne dual-premiership player Keith 'Bluey' Truscott would win some votes. Others may consider another Demon, Jim Stynes, for his work with youth, while politicians like Maurice Rioli, Don Chipp, Ray Groom or Neil Trezise might have their supporters.

For this writer, and surely many others, the greatest person to play league footy is not in the Australian Football Hall of Fame. He didn't captain his club or win a best and fairest.

At 157cm he was the equal third-shortest league player ever. He had small hands but fast legs. He played 54 games for Fitzroy 1932-37 and kicked two goals. No slouch, he was selected in the 1935 Victorian team.

He was the fourth player in the VFL/AFL to identify as indigenous (some early Aboriginal players might not have wanted to identify due to racism) after Joe Johnson, Norm Byron and Norm le Brun.

The individual in question is Doug Nicholls. If that was the end of his story, he would be little more than a footballing footnote.

However, Pastor Sir Douglas Nicholls, as he became known, was a lifelong fighter against prejudice, a tigerish advocate for his people, a man of peace and compassion.

Pastor Doug was born in 1906. In 1927 he arrived in Melbourne and slept in empty fruit boxes at Victoria Market. Within half-a-century he would be sleeping in the Governor's house in Adelaide.

In between times he became a Church of Christ pastor, boxed with Jimmy Sharman's troupe, and starred as a professional sprinter – as well as playing league footy. He went on to become one of the first indigenous Justices of the Peace, the first indigenous Father of the Year, and the first indigenous Australian to be knighted.

Nicholls came to Melbourne after being invited by Carlton, but in one of football's most shameful episodes he was shunned by some or all of the players. They didn't want to train, play or even sit with a black man. They said he smelled.

Carlton's loss was the gain of Northcote in the VFA, where he played for five years and participated in a premiership.

When he was recruited by Fitzroy he repaid their faith by finishing third in the 1934 best and fairest behind Brownlow Medallists Haydn Bunton and Chicken Smallhorn.

His daughter Lillian Tamiru still barracks against Carlton with a vengeance, but she doesn't blame all of the Blues' adherents. "Years later I was at a Fitzroy game and this elderly Carlton lady came up and sat with me and started crying her eyes out," Ms Tamiru recalled.

"She said, when I realised who you were, memories came back to me of the racism your Dad went through.

"Oh, I said, I didn't realise it was so bad. She just cried and said, They wouldn't even let him into the rooms. Dad never talked about it to me but it took me back to conversations I'd overheard a few times, and I thought – ah."

No man with the dignity of Pastor Doug would hold onto that slight forever. When he ran a church in Gore Street, Fitzroy, he would put on an annual Sportsmen's Parade. "The church would be packed out into the streets and we'd have to have a loud speaker out on the footpath," Ms Tamiru said.

"Wonderful footballers from Fitzroy but also from Carlton would come along, and I remember Ken Fraser from Essendon doing a reading. There'd be boxers, jockeys, everyone."

Indeed, it seemed like everyone sought Pastor Doug out from time to time. He met the Pope, he met the Queen, but he also met hundreds of down-and-outers.

In 1941 Pastor Doug was called up for war service and appointed batman to Major Corr. However there were problems in the overcrowded Aboriginal community in Fitzroy and the Victoria Police successfully applied for his release from war service to quell community problems.

For most of the 1950s Pastor Sir Douglas Nicholls lived beside the Northcote football ground where he was employed as a curator. More than just his family home, it was also a half-way house for paroled prisoners, a training ground for indigenous activists, a pastoral care facility, an office for the emerging Victorian Aborigines' Advancement League, a drop-in centre for indigenous people from around Australia, and a meeting place for sporting greats and showbiz stars.

On any given night you might have bumped into Harry Belafonte rubbing shoulders with an Olympic athlete. In the back room, relatives from the mission at Cumberagunja, where Pastor Doug was born, might be sharing space with a teenage mother just released from Winlaton.

Longer-term visitors to the Westgarth Street house included a host of brilliant boxers like Australian champions Elley Bennett, Dave Sands, Jack Hassen, George Bracken, Ron Richards and Bindi Jack.

Gentle, tragic artist Albert Namatjira moved in for a time. “He was the most darling old man,” Ms Tamiru said. “I don’t think he’d been off the mission before he came and stayed with us. He was the humblest, humblest of men.

International visitors to the church – or the Nicholls home, or both – included Belafonte, Louis Armstrong, the Ink Spots, Winifred Atwell (Pastor Sir Doug took her to the football in the afternoon; she played the church harmonium that night), celebrated baritone William Warfield, and Todd Duncan, the first man to play the stage role of Porgy.

The presence of celebrities didn’t distract from the work at hand however: overcoming racism and improving the situation for Aboriginal Australians.

“It wasn’t just his work – it was his life,” his daughter said. “He was on call 24 hours a day. Westgarth Street was like a call-in place, like a small mission.

“Dad was a short man but an absolute giant. ‘I can do it, so can you, let’s go forward.’ That was always his attitude.”

For 15 years he funded this work through his job as curator at Northcote. To their great credit, the trustees of the Northcote Football Ground didn’t raise objections to the procession of visitors to the Nicholls’ home.

During cricket season he would prepare the pitch then roll it with the assistance of Dolly the horse and a dray. Late at night or in the early morning he would run laps of the ground to keep in shape.

After spectators had left games he would pick up the litter and clean up after everyone. He was into his 50s, and been made a Member of the Order of the British Empire, before he left this job.

There can never be unanimity on a question as subjective as ‘greatest ever Australian’. However, Pastor Doug stands out in any company. To this writer, his only credible rival is the magnificent Sir Edward ‘Weary’ Dunlop.

And yet he is not a member of the Australian Football Hall of Fame.

Consider this, from the Hall of Fame's criteria: 'The committee considers candidates on the basis of record, ability, integrity, sportsmanship and character. The number of games played, coached or umpired or years of service is a consideration only and does not determine eligibility.'

Ability? Integrity? Sportsmanship? Character?

His record is less glittering than most inductees, although it swells when augmented by his deeds in the VFA and as the first indigenous player for Victoria.

But taken as a package, he surely qualifies. Let's put the great man in the Hall of Fame.

Growing up with Pastor Doug

By Michael Winkler

The little weatherboard house at 98 Westgarth Street, Northcote is gone. Nothing physical remains to indicate that, less than 50 years ago, this was the home of one of the greatest Australians.

For most of the 1950s Pastor Sir Douglas Nicholls lived beside the Northcote cricket ground where he was employed as a curator. 98 Westgarth Street was much more than just his family home. It was a half-way house for paroled prisoners, a training ground for indigenous activists, a pastoral care facility, an office for the emerging Victorian Aborigines' Advancement League (VAAL), a drop-in centre for indigenous people from around Australia, and a meeting place for sporting greats and showbiz stars.

On any given night you might have bumped into Harry Belafonte rubbing shoulders with a national boxing champion. In the back room, relatives from the mission at Cummeragunja, where Pastor Sir Doug was born, might be sharing space with a teenage mother just released from Winlaton. In the tiny lounge, Geraldine Briggs, Alick and Merle Jackomos, Stan Davies and others met to discuss VAAL business.

"I'd come home from school and there'd be a house full of people," says Pam Pederson, Pastor Sir Doug's youngest daughter. "You'd never have a clue who might be there. It was about that time that Dad was getting heavily involved in Aboriginal affairs, but there were all sorts of other people always dropping by. Mum would find beds for whoever needed them. We'd share our bedrooms with whatever guests we had."

Pastor Sir Doug was born in 1906. In 1927 he arrived in Melbourne and slept in empty fruit boxes at Victoria Market. Within half-a-century he would be sleeping in the Governor's house in Adelaide. In between times he became a Church of Christ pastor, represented Fitzroy and Victoria at football, boxed with Jimmy Sharman's troupe, and

starred as a professional sprinter. He went on to become one of the first indigenous Justices of the Peace, the first indigenous Father of the Year, and the first indigenous Australian to be knighted.

In the 1950s however he was still just 'Uncle Doug' or 'Pastor Doug'. His thriving church in Gore Street, Fitzroy, was a hub for the Koori community. International visitors to the church – or the Nicholls home, or both – included Belafonte, Louis Armstrong, the Ink Spots, Winifred Atwell (Pastor Sir Doug took her to the football in the afternoon; she played the church harmonium that night), celebrated baritone William Warfield, and Todd Duncan, the first man to play the stage role of Porgy.

Longer-term visitors to the Westgarth Street house included a host of brilliant boxers like Australian champions Elley Bennett, Dave Sands, Jack Hassen, George Bracken, Ron Richards and Bindi Jack.

Gentle, tragic Albert Namatjira moved in for a time. "He was the most darling old man," recalls Lilian Tamiru, Pastor Sir Doug's middle daughter. "I don't think he'd been off the mission before he came and stayed with us. He was the humblest, humblest of men. He had a big hessian sugar bag with him. He unravelled it in our kitchen and pulled out this most magnificent painting and gave it to my mother. It was absolutely glorious. Dad took a liking to it and said, 'It would look absolutely beautiful in my office, dear' – I can hear him now. Mum said, 'It was given to me, I really don't want that'. But Dad got it framed and hung it in his office. What do you know, someone stole it. So my Dad never got peace for quite a while."

Another houseguest was Robert Tudawali, who played Marbuck in the film *Jedda*. "He always had his little flask hiding under the mattress," says Pam Pederson. "Mum would make his bed, find the bottle under the mattress, and they wouldn't be happy. Dad would take him aside and say, 'Now son, what do you think you're doing?' He'd always call everyone son or daughter."

Tudawali's travails were matched by dozens of lower-profile indigenous people who turned to the pastor for support. "In those days Dad was always going up to the police station, all hours of the night, because some Aboriginal kid or other had been arrested," Pam says. "Dad would bail them out then they'd come and stay at our place, and he would try to get them jobs. He'd approach different companies where he had good relationships and try to get employment for these Koories."

When young women were discharged from Fairlea or Winlaton, or young men from Pentridge, Pastor Sir Doug would pick them up from the gate and take them back to Westgarth Street. His wife, Lady Gladys, would clothe and feed them, then they would try to organise accommodation.

There was less space for everyone to sleep in after Pam burned down the bungalow at the back of the three-bedroom house. Anyone who thought the sainted Pastor was incapable of losing his temper didn't see him that night.

“I’d gone in there with matches and a candle, and it must have tipped over, and next thing you know it’s all on fire,” Pam says. “All of Dad’s sporting trophies, all these beautiful Indian fabrics and embroidered tablecloths of Mum’s, were stored in there. I quickly walked back inside the house, pretending there was nothing wrong – and all these huge flames were coming up behind me. I watched out the window as if nothing had happened. Then they smelled the fire, and I got a belting that night, I can tell you.”

“That was absolutely the pits that day,” Lilian says. “We stored a lot of memories out there in the bungalow. My Mum could crochet and knit beautifully, and she was a woman who kept everything, pieces of paper, photographs. The bungalow was like her office. And it just burnt to the ground, bang bang bang bang bang!”

Both Pam and Lilian recall the 1950s in Northcote as the best years of their lives. Pam now works at city law firm Maurice Blackburn Cashman. At 59, she continues to thrive in various sporting arenas, like her father before her. She has competed in five Melbourne to Devonport yacht races, swam in the recent Masters Games, and has just taken up triathlon.

She thinks that Christmas in Westgarth Street was the most special time of all. “We’d hold a Christmas party for the whole street. Dad would put up a Christmas tree with beautiful lights. He’d go and see his friends in different businesses and get cordial and mixed bags of lollies and we’d have that for all the kids. The Tramways bus would pull up outside our place because they all knew the Nichollses were having Christmas. Dad would show old movies, Christmas movies or funny ones like Laurel and Hardy. We had a projector and a screen and we’d sit outside and watch, and people would come from everywhere.”

Beneath the happy surface, racism was never far away. “My brother and I were always getting called ‘black this’ and ‘black that’ at school,” Pam says. “The only way was to fight back. I’d say to them, ‘Meet you in the back of the shelter shed and I’ll give you a good whack’. There was one time when some kids were calling my brother names and I told them to meet me behind the shelter-shed. I knew I had my hands full but I was one step ahead: I got a big pot of Clag, and when they came for the fight I threw it in their faces. Another time I remember getting some kids and putting their heads under the water taps. It worked. They stopped calling us names.”

“Our beautiful old house was never empty, always full,” says Lilian. She is seven years older than Pam, and works at the Aboriginal Community Elders Services in Brunswick. She is more political than her sister, and describes herself as being significantly more radical than their rather conservative father. “There were lots of Italians and Greeks in Westgarth Street, and they very much thought like us. Their families would come and stay; it was very close-knit.

“My mother was the strength in our family. She taught us basic living skills. She handled all the money – she was an absolute whiz, she could make money last forever. If Dad ever had money it would be gone in two seconds, probably because he’d spend it on us.

“As I grew older I saw the subtle way that he would be discriminated against. Little racist things done and said. Dad never picked it up but I did. He had this wonderful thing of accepting everyone equally as a human being. I didn’t; I was a beast. I’d think, How can they say that about Dad? How can they call him those names when they don’t even know this person? Dad believed there’s good in everybody. I don’t; I believe there’s evil in a lot of people, too.

“He loved Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy. That was his favourite music, their records from the 1930s. They were also on the big screen. In his football days he tried to go to see one of their movies, at a theatre in Collins Street – possibly the Regent Theatre, I’m not certain – and they wouldn’t let him in because he was black.

“When we got old enough to go to the theatre ourselves we went to that theatre and said, ‘Oh, so this is the place where they didn’t let Sir Doug Nicholls in because he was Aboriginal’. You hate saying those things, but sometimes anger comes over better than tolerance.

“In those days when he was extremely active, he was almost the only one. It’s not like now where there are organisations in every state. In those days our phone was constantly ringing – we didn’t have beautiful offices like people have today. It was all handled by family, friends, Dad himself, from home. It wasn’t just his work – it was his life. He was on call 24 hours a day. Westgarth Street was like a call-in place, like a small mission.

“Dad was a short man but an absolute giant. ‘I can do it, so can you, let’s go forward.’ That was always his attitude.”