

MAKING *LIFE OF THE TOWN* - Footy, Art and Respect in the Southwest

By Paul Roberts, director (2016)

I work as a filmmaker and have produced many Australian-located documentaries about issues such as social justice, race, equality, identity ... and football. What I've found is that football, especially *local* footy stories (the club, the game, the players, the supporters, the community) can function as a window onto all these other nationally significant social issues. And, of course, I love this game.

In 13 half-hour episodes, *Life of the Town* (2009). tracks a season of a team from a small country town. Ongerup, at the eastern end of the Great Southern, is struggling – bad seasons, amalgamated farms, young people emigrating to cities, depopulation. Like a hundred little towns scattered across the agricultural regions of southern Australia, Ongerup is struggling to *survive*. Locals emphasised that fielding a team was essential: “the footy club is the life of our town.”

Producing this series took me back to the southwest, one of the regions on this planet where I've spent time and feel genuinely at home. Wandering through the Stirling Ranges during the shoot, I felt a sense of belonging. It has taken a long time, it's something of an odyssey ...

My father was born in Albany, at the bottom of the Great Southern of Western Australia. It is Al-bany, not All-bany, as Melbourne racing commentators persist in pronouncing it. Albany is the deepwater port from which troops departed for Egypt and Gallipoli in November 1914. I remember my father showing us kids photographs of the troopships and gazing at the unsmiling faces of the soldiers, as they gazed back at me, and thinking how spooky it was.

Each Christmas holiday we travelled far and wide in the southwest camping at stunning locations like Hopetoun, Bremer Bay, the Stirling Ranges and the Porongorups. My parents loved the bush so we avoided campgrounds and people in general. I suppose we roughed it though we never viewed it that way at the time.

These trips were joyous explorations for my brothers and me but they were tinged with sadness, too. My father was brought up on a farm near Mount Barker north of Albany. The family lost the farm when my father was away working in another country. It had to do with business naivety, which runs in my family, and a crooked accountant who was later knighted for services to the state. The subject was a no-no in family talks and I didn't learn the details of it till years

later. My father's melancholia on our trips to the southwest coloured my view of that beautiful country- and still does.

We camped near Gnowangerup, Manjimup, Jerramungup as well as other towns, ending in -up, towns that are, some of them, now extinct. I was told that -up meant "water" in the indigenous language of the region. Later I learnt it means "place of". John Hassell was the original land baron of the southwest. Hassell holdings were over a million acres by the early 1900s. My father took us to that family's original property where he showed us the whipping post where old man Hassell would have his 'natives' flogged.

My father made no comment on it, as was his way, but it disturbed me. Staring out the window as we drove through small towns in our station wagon I would occasionally see groups of Aboriginal people, eyes averted, history unknown. Who were these people?

Cut to 1984: I take a job as researcher for the new government's Aboriginal Land Enquiry. Aboriginal interests in the land in the southwest region is my brief. My co-researcher is Les Eades a Noongar man from Narrogin. Noongar? Often spelt Nyungar or Nyoongah, Les insists it's pronounced and spelled Noongar, so I'm sticking with that.

It was a great job and opened my eyes onto much of the hidden history of the southwest. Les was a football umpire and we attended local games which I came to understand and respect not only as part of the rites of passage for young men- as it had been for me and many of my peers- but also as a pathway towards reconciliation between Wadjallas (European descent) and Noongars.

Les went on to become the first Aboriginal person to umpire a Great Southern Football Association grand final, a very big deal 30 years ago. Les and I remain good friends. In 1989, together with other colleagues, we made the documentary *Black Magic*, a celebration of Noongar sportsmen including Graham 'Polly' Farmer, Phil and Jim Krakouer, Eugene Eades, Stephen Michael, Syd Jackson and Derek Kickett. It was a low-budget, grass-roots film and it surprises me that it still has a cult status among very diverse Australian communities to this day.

It surprises me, too, that at the time I failed to fully grasp the bigger-picture story of Noongars playing top-level football. It is a story of spectacular over-representation. From a small population in the southwest corner of Australia comes a stunning array of talent. Farmer, Krakouer, Kickett: all Noongar names, as are Bennell, Garlett, Pickett, Winmar and Yarran. While filming in 2008 I

decided to ask questions about the nature of this talent and to try to understand the bigger picture.

I negotiate a 13-part series focussing on a single town and its football team. It's a pittance budget again and commissioned by National Indigenous Television (NITV) so it has to have 'strong indigenous content'. I phone Les Eades and ask him 'what town?' He doesn't hesitate: Ongerup.

I had been to Ongerup years before and remembered there wasn't much to it. Don't blink. I started research by phoning local businesses and footy club people, no one I knew. Some were wary when I said it was for NITV. What's NITV? Was I a do-gooder from the city? One bloke asked me if I was an animal liberationist. But soon people were opening up. I was told many times over that Ongerup is a friendly town and soon I was welcomed down to do the recce.

Recce? A recce is the pivotal research phase for scripting a documentary film. I had five days in and around Ongerup to achieve this. Above all, a successful recce depends on being decisive about a range of story-telling choices: deciding what interviews are going to look like; nailing locations for interviews, cut-aways, country and town shots and community interaction sequences (peoples' houses, the footy club, the pub); deciding how to film football games with only two cameras; finding and contracting a narrator or presenter; and, especially, making decisions about 'talent', who will be the talking heads.

Some of the talent was 'given': the coach had to be a lead role as did the team captain; the club president was scripted as were selected volunteer workers, men and women who'd donated hours of time over many years; Wadjalla and Noongar star players; and the town, itself, I knew that Ongerup needed to have a character role in the drama.

In 2008, Ongerup was a town of 130 people. Two decades earlier it had double that population and 80 kids in the school. By 2008, school numbers were down to the low thirties. It had a general store, a tyre shop, a telecentre, the Malleefowl Conservation Centre, a busy wheat-bin, a petrol station with café, a small caravan park and a pub.

Ongerup has always been grain and sheep country. Fifty years ago, farms were perhaps 600 hectares and there was demand for labour for clearing, fencing, shearing, etc. Now farms are 5 or 10 times that size and highly mechanised. Around the town you see signs of a flourishing past and signs of an uncertain future: an unused country-style golf course, a bowling club that doesn't seem to be in use, empty houses and empty streets. It reminded me of towns I'd passed

through in the Mallee of Victoria, towns with a past – but what future? I can't say it didn't make me feel blue.

Format. Each episode would have highlights of the weekly game, whether home or away, tracking Ongerup's progress through season 2008. I decided that these games would cut in and out of the main narrative of each episode and that this narrative would be biography- we call them 'bios'. So each episode would focus on a single character (or a couple, or a family group) and thereby build up a portrait of a community and its characters.

One of these characters is Brendon (Jibba) Deering. We spelt Jibba wrong in our film. Phonetically right, spelling wrong. It should have been "Gibba", nicknamed after East Fremantle star player Garry Gibellini whom Gibba (I'll correct it hereon) followed as a kid. Gibba won 5 club champion awards for Ongerup in the 1970s and 80s. Contemporaries are adamant that he was the best footballer of his time in the whole of the Great Southern, but Gibba never even considered a WAFL career. Ongerup, to him, is home, the best place in the world.

He is a handsome man in his 50s, fit and strong, gravelly voice, mullet haircut. We see and hear from him in every episode of the series. It was Gibba who gave us our title:

Gibba: The footy team's got to be kept going or we'll lose our working men, lose our shops, lose our social life, our whole identity. It's the life of our town.

Episode 11 (Home Sweet Home) is a bio of Gibba and his wife Claudine. It's Sunday and he's putting down a home-brew. In a running commentary he tells us how it's done, the do's and don'ts. We hear that he's brewed between 7 and 8,000 litres over ten years but considers he's drunk only 1,000 or so himself. He confesses, aside to camera:

Gibba: I've got a disease. Wish I could just stay still ... but I can't!

He gives us the inside running on what it's like to live in a small community. You have to tolerate people you don't necessarily like. Always be positive and don't engage in gossip. Everyone has to multi-task.

Gibba: If someone asks you to do something, you just do it. If you don't, there's nowhere to hide!

He is ubiquitous around the town. He cuts firewood and delivers it to pensioners and single mums – 'if they're good-looking'. As part of his job as a shire worker

he cleans out farmers' septic tanks. He claims to enjoy the work. The call-outs are often more social than anything. The farmer is feeling lonely and isolated and just needs to talk to someone. Gibba performs that service. He knows where isolation, loneliness and depression can track in the bush ...

Around the footy club, Gibba has been champion player and coach and he continues to be chief organiser of social activities, runner, goal umpire, toilet cleaner ... whatever needs doing.

Gibba, as our presenter's voice-over concludes, an inspirational character writing his own script.

Kelly O'Neill is the gentle patriarch of the Ongerup region. He turned 70 during production and we filmed the celebrations at the footy club. Kelly has a historian's grasp of the import of past events. During the recce he talked to me about his father establishing the farm in the Depression years and how it was the Noongar workers who really pulled them through the hard times. One anecdote left me with the impression that it was Kelly's father and his *values* that made the biggest imprint on young Kelly: as an adolescent he called one of the Noongar workers by his first name. His father grabbed him and corrected: "It's Mr _____ to you."

The Ongerup team began in 1934 and the Ongerup Football Association in 1936, eight teams representing eight towns in football, netball and hockey. Kelly describes how they resisted pressure to play sport on Sundays. Every second Saturday becomes a family day where folk from one town renew friendships- and rivalries- with folk from another, a social occasion as much as a sporting one.

Kelly: If someone is working for you and he plays footy on Sunday, he's not much use on Monday. At least if he plays on Saturday he's got all Sunday to get over a hangover! Got to be realistic.

Judy O'Neill describes her husband as a kind and positive man: if it hasn't rained for a while, it soon will; if it's raining a flood, it will soon fine up again.

Kelly: If you're kind to people, they'll be kind to you.

In episode 6 ("Respect") I paired off Kelly with Athol Farmer. We call this a 'two-hander' format, cutting back and forth between two characters and thereby (hopefully) coming to a deeper understanding of their shared humanity. It's a difficult scenario, just quietly.

Athol is a Noongar man from the town of Katanning. He is a landscape painter of the Carrolup School. He explains that Carrolup was a stolen generation institution west of Katanning where the children were first given paints and crayons in the 1940s and encouraged to produce artworks. Initially dismissed as childish or 'primitive' art, it has had a revival, particularly in the USA, where Athol has exhibited and where his work is better known and appreciated than it is at home.

As he paints a canvas in his backyard shed, Athol talks about growing up in times and towns where there was a lot of racial friction. He was starting to get in trouble with certain authorities when, in 1988, he joined the Ongerup club and came under the influence of Kelly O'Neill, Gibba and others.

Athol: That was the great thing about Ongerup, you're not black, you're not white. You're just footballers.

Kelly likens the situation of Noongars to that of his Irish ancestors viz a viz their English masters. Kelly- and again, I believe he inherited his father's values- was always determined that Ongerup would be a level town where no one is viewed as being better than anyone else.

Athol talks about the Penny brothers, Chris, Dave and Ronnie, contemporary Ongerup players now getting into their 30s. Chris has been a champion player. They are Noongars from Tambellup but their father Isaac (Athol's uncle) played for Ongerup, lived and worked there. Athol stresses the point that Kelly and Isaac were *friends*. Mates.

Kelly doesn't name names but is unimpressed by the culture of some towns where 'them' and 'us' applied. Or still applies. Noongars do this, Wadjallas do that, no overlap. Kelly's egalitarian values pervade Ongerup: maximum overlap.

I called this episode "Respect". Respect means self-respect, it can mean tolerance or plain decency. It is even evident in the widespread usage of "Noongar" and "Wadjalla" (rather than Aboriginal or European, indigenous or white), denoting, I believe, a respect and understanding of cultural difference.

It can even mean friendship.

Two Cameras

Someone tells me that 16 cameras cover an AFL game these days. It could be more. Heaven knows how they communicate and who does the vision switching.

It's becoming a fine art (although it's not up to channel 9's cricket coverage, yet, I have to say). To shoot a game with two cameras, you need a gun shooter who understands the game (has played it) and who knows when to use zoom and when not. You need some height so you place him on the back of a Holden ute, right on the boundary, between half-forward and the wing. You place him on the forward line of the team you expect to win. If it is windy- and it usually is around Ongerup in winter- you place him on the side of the ground that faces the breeze. That's where the action is likely to be. Camera 1 is on sticks and is only hand-held when quarter, half, three-quarter or final siren blows.

Camera 2 is hand-held. His job is to shoot crowd reactions (for instance, to a game-changing goal or a brilliant tackle), to cover close-up football action when the ball is near, and to take direction. Direction? That means I am watching the game carefully and if I sense something developing (like a fight between two players) I will direct Cam 2 to focus on that.

Coverage we call it. We do our level best to cover the action. When the crew miss something it becomes a problem for the editor. In my trade we usually call that 'cheating' but I'm not going to elaborate on that.

The Presenter

Again, I rang my friend Les Eades in Narrogin. I asked him why I was covering Ongerup, such a small town, rather than one of the bigger towns.

Les Eades: I played for Ongerup when I was a kid. They treated me like a human being.

Okay. I shut up.

Les gives me a few suggestions for presenter, both Wadjalla and Noongar ex-players. Finally: try one of the Kicketts, Paul. Try Dale.

Dale Kickett. Dale played for a record five AFL sides. He finished with Fremantle, won a fairest and best award and two runner-ups and is generally rated as among the top half dozen to have played for that club.

Still super-fit, Dale is an understated man. You can sense toughness and determination. He doesn't smile often, even when he's joking. I quizzed him about his career but never got more than a one-sentence reply. He gave me the impression that he's moved on: life is about family and friends, not footy any more.

One afternoon during production we had to pick up some gear from Fremantle Oval. The Dockers were training and some of the players and spectators yelled out and waved to Dale. He sat in the car and just gave a wave. One wave, hardly a response. I asked him about it later.

Dale: I'd like people to remember me as a good footballer but I think most of them only remember me for one incident.

That incident was actually several. The so-called demolition derby of 2000 was a supercharged game. Four players were suspended but Dale took the big hit, nine weeks. Phil Read also took a big hit judging by the shape of his face at the end of the game.

Dale did a superb job narrating the games in each episode and bridging interview footage with editorial comment. Towards the end of his contract I asked him again about the highlights of his career. His answer surprised me. He said: going back to Tammin. Tammin is a tiny wheatbelt town east of Northam- as small as Ongerup- home to Derek, Dale, Larry and other Kicketts. After he retired from the Dockers, Dale played a season with his boyhood side. They won the premiership. That was his highlight. He almost smiled recalling it. Almost.

Dale was a moral to present "Life of the Town".

Season 2008

Ongerup started the season badly losing four of five games. Overall, they lost five games by under a goal, most being fades in the last quarter. They stormed home at season's end, winning their last five games. In the final game they were still a chance at the four, depending which teams won and lost in the other games.

Winners in 2007, it was not to be in '08. Ongerup hosted the grand final- it was their turn- (Jerramungup won), served out thousands of pies, hot dogs, hamburgers and beers but their team was watching, not playing.

Montage

Competitive sport is, according to people I spoke to, the life of a country town. It ran through all our filming and interviewing. Here are just three recorded comments:

Kelly O'Neill: Without your footy team it's pretty lonely. It's just the jell that holds us together.

Robbie Miniter (Noongar man from Gnowangerup, former coach of Ongerup): Kelly O'Neill is a legend. Noongars call him 'moodich'. Moodich means 'solid'. Coaching Ongerup to a premiership (in 2007) was the highlight of my life.

Dave Williams (Noongar man from Katanning, three times winner Ongerup best player, father of Mark, former Hawthorn full forward): It's more than football. It's about social interaction. People become socially isolated if football's not part of the town.

Final Scene

My small crew, three of us, returned to Ongerup just before Christmas to do Episode 13, a retro on the season and a look at the future. I'm not sure why I named it "Around the Corner". Perhaps it's because you never know what you will find around the corner. I would rename it now, but retrospect is seldom kind.

There had been late rains and flooding and a promising harvest had been largely ruined, but the mood was sanguine. Gibba was in good form: good year, bad year? Farming's a punt. 2009? Couldn't be better, mate, premiership year coming up.

Running a club in a small town is a very hard business. A few individuals have to do the work of many. It snapped in Ongerup as it has snapped in many little towns around this country. I wish I could give you a happy ending to this story. It's still the Ongerup Football Association, but Ongerup is not in it. They folded at the end of 2011. I wept

Let's go back to that 'bigger picture' I mentioned before.

The main agricultural region of WA is enclosed by a bumpy line extending from a little north of Geraldton to a little east of the town of Esperance, on the south coast. The number and calibre of footballers to graduate from small towns within this region is extraordinary. The three great rovers who began their careers in the 1960s, and played for WA as rivals to Skilton, Aylett and Leigh Matthews: Keith Doncon, Barry Cable and Bill Walker. Doncon, from Wickiepin in the Great Southern (population 250) was named in the all-Australian team of 1966 as well as the East Perth team of the century. Walker, from Nungarin (popn 142), is the

only player to win four Sandover Medals. Cable, from Narrogin (popn 4,300) - 3 Sandovers, AFL Hall of Fame - was described by Barassi as probably the most talented player he'd coached. This was after a North Melbourne premiership win, when Cable was well past 30.

Ross Ditchburn kicked 12 goals in a game for Carlton in 1982 then, for family reasons, returned to the farm in Kukerin (popn 400) in the Great Southern. Mal Brown, Sandover Medalist and sometime pugilist? Mal was brought up in Dowerin (population 350) in the central wheatbelt.

Dowerin? This is also hometown to Buddy Franklin and that's where the statistics really start to get interesting. Lance Franklin's mother is a Kickett. Dale is his first cousin.

WA's southwest farming region coincides almost exactly with the region anthropologist Norman Tindale delineated as Noongar land on his famous map. About 35,000 people who identify as 'Noongar' live in this region. Today, most Noongars live in Perth and the other coastal centres. The parents and grandparents of today's urban Noongars lived and worked mainly in small country towns across the region where many still choose to stay.

Leon Davis comes from York in the wheatbelt; Nicky Winmar from Pingelly in the Great Southern; the Krakouers from Mt Barker; the Haydens from Brookton; Mark Williams from Katanning; Dale and Derek Kickett from tiny Tammin. The name Farmer is generally associated with Tambellup or nearby towns. Pickett is also a Noongar name. Byron Pickett is tagged as a South Australian but he was born and reared in Kelleberrin, 200 km east of Perth. Stephen Michael comes from Kojonup. He won two Sandovers and captained WA in state-of-origin games in the 1980s. I once asked Stephen why he refused big offers to play VFL. He smiled pointing at the dust where we were sitting and said, "This is where I belong."

Tune in to any weekend AFL game and you will hear commentators extolling the 'natural' prowess of indigenous players. What they fail to acknowledge is that up to a third of the currently listed indigenous AFL players identify as 'Noongar'. Jetta is a Noongar name. Likewise Garlett, Ryder, Hill, Bennell and Yarran. To have so many listed players out of a source population of only 35,000 is an extraordinary statistic. I'm no good at maths but the representation of Noongars in the AFL must be at least ten times their representation in the general populace. I have looked at other codes of team sports internationally and found nothing to compare with this stat.

But what is this about? Why such an ‘anomaly’? Meanwhile, read some transcripts from *Life of the Town*. It may help to uncover meaning.

Kelly O’Neill: You can’t tell a Noongar how to play footy. They play it their way. Whether you’re playing for or against them, they’ve got that uncanny knack of knowing where the other players are. Even when you can’t see the guy ... they know!

Athol Farmer: When you get out there you want to express yourself. The passion. Get it out of you. You’ve got to imagine it before you get the ball ... like read the ball off a pack, snap a goal. These are the things in your mind even before you go out there. You’re being creative in your mind ... and when it happens there’s no better feeling. It’s a rush. ...

... It’s the same with painting, all about balance, you know, where you’re going to put this tree or this rock ... and it’s hands on which I believe is part of Noongars’ nature, working with the land and not against it. Footy and art, to me, are very similar.

Last weekend the Channel Seven commentators were raving about Cyril Rioli. There was much talk about the “natural skills” of indigenous players and an implication that their “silky” skills may be genetically based. I suppose that may be so but I tend to look elsewhere. I don’t want to sound critical because some of Rioli’s plays were mind-blowing but I sometimes wish AFL people would take the hype about indigenous players just a step or two further.

I don’t know if Cyril identifies as ‘indigenous’. His uncles grew up on Melville Island playing a fast, barefoot brand of football that you would never see in southern states, almost a different code. I know that they called themselves ‘Tiwi’ because Maurice Rioli told me so. I fancy Cyril would say the same thing. Stephen Michael certainly identifies as Noongar.

With knowledge comes respect ... and vice versa. Maybe footy and art are very similar. Someone should write a book about it.