



The Day  
Eddie  
Played  
for  
Rumbalara

A very well drilled Deniliquin senior football team defeated Rumbalara on Saturday, 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2022 at Rumbalara's home ground in Shepparton, with a large crowd in attendance, but the day was memorable for more than just who won or lost.

There were two words on every spectators lips and every players mind: Eddie Betts. In the week before the match Eddie responded enthusiastically to Paul Briggs' phone invitation to play for Rumba. Things unfolded rapidly, Thursday night Rumbalara President Josh Atkinson confirmed to the local media that the great Betts would don the Rumbalara jersey. Melbourne's **Age** quoted coach Jason Traianidis "the community is buzzing with excitement" and it truly was. (M. James, 2022)

Betts, now coaching at Geelong, came to play for an Aboriginal team in a regional competition for no match fee, ahead of many other offers. He said he wanted to play for Rumba 'to affirm its identity as an Aboriginal football club'. Rumbalara means 'over the rainbow' and in the post war period the word has come to symbolize economic, cultural and social renewal for the Yorta Yorta people of the Murray and Goulburn Valley region on Victoria. When Eddie ran on to the ground it was a welcome reminder of the raison d'être of Rumbalara and humbling to think that a champion of the AFL also felt the need to come, with his family, to be a part of Rumbalara.

Eddie knows how important sport can be for personal and community development. He said of his own life: "Sport to me was basically everything. I didn't really have an education. I didn't go to school. I couldn't read and I couldn't write. I was lucky enough to get drafted to Carlton in the pre-season draft and in those three years of my AFL career I did literacy and numeracy classes because I still couldn't read or write and I didn't know what I was signing." (Betts)

Sport and football has a big cultural history in the Murray and Goulburn Valley region. It is important to recognise this because it gives us an understanding of the deep feeling and tradition of Aboriginal sports men and women. Blandowski and Krefft

documented Aboriginal football being played near the junction of the Murray and Darling rivers in 1856-7. This is significant in terms of documented history and it represented more than just a solitary First Nations family group. Remarking on the now famous illustration, Blandowski recorded in German, in his notes “.. A group of children is playing with a ball; the ball is made out of Typha roots; it is not thrown or hit with a bat but it is kicked up in the air with the foot. Aim of the game: never let the ball hit the ground”. And his associate Krefft wanting to observe “a silly boy” about fourteen years of age noted: “..I had not sufficient time to observe him, he played football with the other boys of the tribe and appeared to be the most expert of them”.(Blandowski)

Aboriginal football games now known by the Waiworung words “Marn Grook” or “ball game” were played from Western Victoria up and down the Murray River and across the country. The whole community men, women and children played and games might go on for hours, sometimes over days. The man most identified with the ‘invention’ of Australian football, Tom Wills, participated in these games in the Western District of Victoria and in a later period took the famous Aboriginal cricket team to England in 1868 (Whipress) but Geoffrey Blainey for one argues that if Wills was influenced by Aboriginal ball games then he would have said so. For Blainey the Aboriginal game only influenced the development of high marking as the style of play and the rules changed and evolved. (Blainey) But the Aboriginal practice of predominantly kicking the ball, as Blandowski observed above, was undoubtedly influential on Wills and Australian football and this is not well enough acknowledged. A year after Blandowski’s celebrated illustration, the first recorded game of Australian football was held between Scotch College and Melbourne Grammar on August 7, 1858. (Blainey, 1990, p. 15)

In the colonised world, sport and football was a shared enthusiasm for Aboriginals and Europeans. For Aboriginal men though it was a potential passport through a segregated society as well as a source of income, pride and independence. (Tatz) (Hay) (Cato) In Victoria in 1886 the so-called “Half Caste Act” attempted to



Blandowski, Aboriginal foot ball being played on the Murray, 1857

merge Aboriginal men and women into the mainstream world and to segregate and isolate traditional culture and so-called full blood Aboriginal people. It was a terrible period of coercion in which Aboriginal communities had no civil rights or freedom. In defiance of this Aboriginal communities sought sanctuary in mission stations and Aboriginal men took up shearing, and other pastoral jobs and fed funds back into the stations and also tried to run independent farms. Sport and competing against non-Aboriginal teams was a way of bucking this whole dreadful ethos of oppression and subjugation. At Maloga and Cummergunja the remarkable Thomas Shadrach James not only established a “scholars hut” to provide quality education for Aboriginal adults and children, he managed football and cricket teams from 1883. He would frequently write to the secretaries of town sports associations seeking opportunities to play. In her discussion of the missionary Daniel Mathews, Nancy Cato wrote that many Aboriginal men recognised that beyond the confines of religion Aboriginal men had discovered their “prowess in sport, particularly cricket and running, gave them a passport to the white man’s world”. (Cato) When in 1898 and 1899 the Cummergunja Cricket team won the local competition another dimension of independence and pride was added. This flowed on into athletics and football.

In this period it was one thing for an Aboriginal athlete to win a race, or to star in a sporting team, it was another for all-Aboriginal team to win premierships. It created a pride and a resistance to the dominant racism of the time. The feeling of pride in collective achievements began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century at Maloga and Cummergunja and has carried on into our contemporary world. Rumbalara’s home ground at Mercury Drive, Shepparton is a safe place and a place of knowledge . The games, training sessions and activities of the football and netball club have power and meaning. If you sit on the seats outside the clubroom there is an electric atmosphere.

Cummergunja elder Col Walker was one of the many people who came to see Eddie play for Rumba on 22<sup>nd</sup> April. He reminisced



Members of the Cummergunja Football team  
1898 the year of the first 'Invincibles' Premier-  
ship, Tom Dunolly centre

over the 87 years he has lived at Cummeragunja.. Deniliquin elder Tom Day arrived and sat by Col's side and several other Deniliquin and Cummergunja elders also gathered to say hello and talk. This is the way it is, every game at Rumbalara. These seats are as hallowed as any at the MCG. In the clubhouse if you are lucky enough, and allowed to go into the kitchen then you will find a similar feeling. There are no afternoon teas prepared from a packet here, everything is made from scratch. Kaye's Ginger Fluffs are highly sought after and so too homemade scones, rocky road chocolate and other signature specialities. No matter what the score of the games, no one leaves before half time afternoon tea. Visitors are welcomed as royalty. It is *the tradition*, a part of the hospitality that goes back to the days on the riverbanks where visitors were always welcomed and treated with respect. In his reminiscences of the aboriginal people at Cummergunja Ronald Morgan wrote: “.. there were many good organisers of sports of both sexes among the Aborigines.. they had a cricket team which had the honour of holding many trophies won in local district competitions; likewise their football team. This sport seems to be the one they took to very seriously and, as far as the team was concerned, it was widely known”. (Nelson & Nelson)

With this rich history you can start to appreciate what is special about Rumbalara. It has evolved from the community atmosphere of Cummeragunja mission, the river flats at Maroopna and the traditional camps along the mighty river networks of the Goulburn Valley and beyond. Yes, other clubs have wonderful traditions too, but the ethos of Rumbalara is a modern day manifestation of something that is thousands of years old and you feel it deep in your guts and in your heart. Moreover every team that Rumbalara plays or interacts with benefits from, what might be called, this love of family and culture in action.

Some find the Rumbalara atmosphere a bit bewildering and some find it threatening and confronting. How can a people like the Yorta Yorta be so generous and kind, while still living in the worst houses and streets of Shep, having survived a genocidal military assault and been subjugated by the worst cultural,

eugenic hatred and enduring racism year after year. But that is precisely it. The “invincible spirit” shines through. The worse it gets, the more this resilient spirit appears. There is a high mark, a brilliant goal against the odds. There is a young player, who in the midst of defeat, shows some magic. Adversity brings opportunity to get better, to be wiser and to find new ways to do things.

Eddie played in the game against Deniliquin on April 22. There is a big history between Deniliquin, Rumbalara and Aboriginal sport. As Eddie Betts showed his skills on the field it brought back memories of other magic days. In 1926 21 year old Lynch Cooper, William Cooper's son, won every sprint event at the Deniliquin Athletics Carnival and in that same year the Cummeragunja team, 9.12.66 , beat Deniliquin 4.7.31 This was one of the few games that are documented in which Doug and Herbert “Dowie” Nicholls played together for Cummergunja. (“FOOTBALL,” 1926) “Can you imagine Lynch Cooper on the wing” someone said! Two years later Lynch went on to stun 20,000 spectators to win the Stawell Gift from the eight yards marker in what is regarded as one of the greatest Stawell victories (11.93 seconds uphill, against a stiff breeze). Stawell, one of the oldest and richest footraces, attracted people from all over the world even in the late nineteenth century. The following year as a sequel to Stawell, Cooper won the World Sprint Championship which involved competing in four races over 75, 100, 130, and 220 yards. He was Australia's first Aboriginal World Champion and it all began in Deniliquin and in the relationship between Cummergunja, Moonacullah and Deniliquin. (“STAWELL GIFT,” 1928)

It meant a lot for Aboriginal sportspeople to win on a level playing field in a context where in mainstream life there was no chance of equality. So every opportunity was taken. Athletics, football, boxing, dance, song were all arenas that Aboriginal sports people excelled. In the front of the club house talk inevitably emerged of champions past and future. The authoritative sporting bible of the early 20th century, *The Millers Guide* reckoned that there were more sporting champions at Cummergunja





**Lynch Cooper**  
Champion Sprinter of the World

than any other part of Australia<sup>1</sup>. But the Moonacullah Aboriginal team, from the mission near Deniliquin, also had its champions.

In 1932 Cummera played Moonacullah and *The Deniliquin Independent* described the clash in glowing terms: "Playing a brilliant, clean game of football of the type that delights barrackers, the match...was an exhibition of how the game can be played at a fast pace without the players getting ruffled and abusing the morals of the code. At first the play was congested, but it soon opened out and from then on the onlookers were revelling in a delightful exhibition of pace, excellent shepherding, passing out, and marking." The scores at the end of the game were Moonacullah 16.22.118 Cummergunja 10.7.67. The best players for Moonacullah were Hamilton, Taylor, P. Dunolly (jr.), D. Ingram, R. Cooper, J. Day and S. Taylor, for Cummergunja E.C. Briggs, Nelson, Charles, Weston, T. Dunolly and P. Dunolly (snr) This game was played at the height of the era in which the Cummergunja team was known as "the Invincibles" because they were very rarely defeated. ("ABORIGINALS' FOOTBALL," ; "WEDNESDAY'S FOOTBALL," 1932) ("MOONACULLAH PREMIERS," 1932)

Cummergunja "Invincibles" were rarely defeated in the 1920s. After winning six Premierships they were prohibited from local competitions in 1932. That year Moonacullah also won their local premiership and in the following year stopped playing as a team in the local Deniliquin league. Melbourne's Sporting Globe said the ban in the Moira Western and Ridings Football Association was because Cummera were too good. ("Aborigines Make Able Players, Sporting Globe, 18 May, 1932)

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1 George Nelson wrote "The *Millers Guide* is sometimes called the Australian Racing Bible. It was founded by James Miller in 1875." Many Cummergunja champions were included in its pages. In a mission population of 400 there were 14 gift winners including Selwyn Briggs, Stanley Charles, Charlie Muir, Alf Morgan, Walter Bux (Stawell 2<sup>nd</sup> place), Lynch Cooper (Stawell gift winner and world champion sprinter) Geoff Cooper, Don Briggs, Len Jackson, Wally Briggs, Billy Muir, Jimmy Murray, Des James, Sean Charles, Doug Nicholls, 'Shady' James, Charlie Samuels.



**CUMMERAGUNJA FOOTBALL TEAM.**

Winners of the Moira Riding Football Association's Premiership. They won the title throughout the whole season. An interesting fact is that every player and every official—president, vice-presidents, and committeemen—is a member of the Cummeragunja Aboriginal Mission Station, and all arrangements were carried out entirely by themselves. Cummeragunja is near Picola, Victoria.

After the ban on the Aboriginal teams, the town team of Deniliquin recruited Moonacullah's Dick Hamilton and Joe Day and Cummergunja's E.C "Eddie" Briggs. That year in 1933 Deniliquin won their first premiership in the Echuca League: "Eddy Briggs, Dick Hamilton and Joe Day have rendered the club valuable and consistent service all season. Eddy and Dick played at their top on Saturday, the turf suiting Eddy, who let himself all out in his dashes, and the goal he scored brought a well merited round of applause. Dick soared high for his marks and kicked accurately and is no doubt a high-class full forward. Joey Day, the midget of the trio, struck Rochester's best man on the day, J. Newman, and though he played his best he could not master his man until the second half. Still it was an honest game by him, and there was no one more pleased than he that Deni won. Though there was criticism in certain quarters at securing the services of these boys, it has since been effectively replied to, ***for their skill is undoubted, and as sportsmen, there are none better in the team. Without them Deniliquin's fight for the premiership would not have been so successful***" (emphasis added). (Round\_the\_Neck, 1933) Eddy Brigg's run from centre half back and drop kick goal in the Grand Final was one of the highlights of the season and will be remembered for years to come. ("MOAMA HERE TOMORROW," 1934)

Tom Day's Uncle Joe was voted best and fairest for Deniliquin that year, not by umpires, but by the crowds who all got to register a vote when they attended the games. Dick Hamilton won the trophy for the most goals kicked in the competition and was Deniliquin's captain and champion player for many years right up until the war. ("[No heading].", 1933) Col reckoned Dick Hamilton rose so high in the packs that he never needed to raise his arms above his shoulders and took only chest marks.

The resistance to all Aboriginal clubs continued. In 1946 the 'Daish's River Flats All Blacks' won the Central Goulburn Football League Div 2 premiership {All Blacks 19.9. (117) Toolamba 14.9.(93)} then they too were not allowed to play. It would take another forty years for Rumbalara to be formed.

## All Blacks Debut

In a fast and entertaining game at Shepparton recreation reserve, All Blacks outlasted Shepparton to win by a goal. It was an impressive debut for the speedy Aboriginal side.

Maroons opened with a burst, scoring five straight goals in the first quarter. Shepparton continued confidently in the second quarter and had the useful lead of 13 points when the teams retired for the half-time interval.

Fifteen goals were recorded in a strenuous third quarter—probably a district record for an opening match. R. Withers was in deadly form for Maroons and scored his ninth goal during the term. At the last change, Shepparton had a century score on the board and a lead of 21 points.

The crucial final quarter was a triumph for the All Blacks. They held the tiring Shepparton goalless and, with speed and precision, repeatedly stormed forward, rapidly overhauling their leeway. There were cheers when they goaled to snatch the lead for the first time to score a deserved and popular six points' win.

Gate takings were £14 15/4, from which Shepparton donated £5 to All

For Paul Briggs, whose father and uncles played in the Invincible Cummergunja sides of the 1920s and early 1930s, and his peer group, there was always something to aspire to that had been set by the standards of the Cummergunja elders. The model of using football as a means to connect with people and organisations was well established despite these continual bans and difficulties. In the 1970s Paul, Johnny Murray and several other Aboriginal football players from Shepparton went to Melbourne and played with different clubs as contract players. Paul noted “I never developed roots with a club. I never developed loyalty”. (Jackomos et al.) Towards the end of his time in Melbourne he began training with Fitzroy Football Club. But it was the Fitzroy Stars that really helped him to connect with so many different people and organisations. He acknowledges the Stars were a catalyst for many things: “My political education started when I joined the Fitzroy Stars. In 1977 I was Captain when the Stars won the Premiership of the North Metropolitan Football League. Because of the nature of the club and the people involved with it – Jim Berg, Jock Austin, Elma Thorpe and Bruce McGuinness – the Stars were a catalyst for political education”. (Jackomos et al., p. 190)

Paul’s experience with the Fitzroy Stars and the unsatisfactory life as a contract player meant that he also started wider networking with other Aboriginal football teams and players. The germ of the Rumbalara Football and Netball began in the 1970s when Aboriginal football players started to revel playing with each other in the NAIDOC Sports Carnivals. “We’d get together and train in the Goulburn Valley and go down and try out for Victoria together” Johnny Murray recalled. There were early Rumbalara football teams before there was a ground and rooms: “Whenever there was a game on – we’d go. We’d get the boys together and we’d be off. We were probably the most travelled club in Australia” (Potter, 2000, p. 16)

In 1994 while RFNC was still awaiting acceptance to play in a competition the building of the clubrooms began at Mercury Drive. It was a leap of faith but the ancestors would show the way. In 1996 Rumbalara was asked to be a second division side



Rumbalara 1998 Premiers 100 years after the Cummeragunja  
Invincibles Premiership of 1898

in the restructured Goulburn Valley League. The club was admitted as an affiliate member by AFL Victoria in late November and it had to have twelve teams on the field in April. The club jumped at the opportunity and succeeded, with some difficulty, to achieve the requirements. In fact, it was a miracle. But by now the club was running on something more than normal human energy. It has been that way ever since, running on a wing and a prayer without the resources of a town and its rank and file members frequently with only a few dollars in their pockets week in week out.

Paul wrote “Rumba started with a memory, a wish and a vision. And a long torpedo from the centre of the ground, at a challenging time in our history. Rumba is an expression of who we are, our culture and our identity. ... It generates high ideals and enormous passion – the same high ideals and passions that have been part of the great Aboriginal sportspeople and teams throughout our journey from the late 1890s to the present. Rumba consistently reminds me of this history and the endeavours of our elders. It reminds me of the ‘Invincibles’, the great Cummeragunja teams of the 1920s and 1930s; of the fireside stories told to be me by my father, who played in those teams and who was born in Cummera in 1898, the year of the first premiership. These stories are to be treasured and shared in respect of our ancestors and elders. They are the building blocks of our esteem; we owe it to our ancestors to instil these memories in our young players and share them with all peoples”. (P. Briggs, p. 3)

Having gained entry to a competition it was another thing to endure the often vicious abuse from spectators on the football field. John Murray recalls it was tough even playing for non-Aboriginal clubs (Murray, 2021). Daniel James recalled “I remember going to football games, watching the Goulburn Valley Football League teams like Mooroopna, which had a high proportion of Aboriginal players within the team, and the racist abuse that they copped from spectators that I was standing next to was just horrendous. Absolutely, absolutely horrendous. The saying ‘what happens on the field, stays in the field’ happened all the way from



the inception of football, all the way through to that flashpoint in '93 when for the first time what happened on the field didn't stay on the field." (James, 2021) The pressure was at another level for Rumbalara from its first season. (D. James, 2021) "Every other club would so badly want to beat Rumbalara" and frequently the desire to win boiled over to racism. "When Rumbalara went into play at towns like Mansfield and Alexandra extra police were called in.. it was very tough" (Murray, 2021)

Then there was the umpiring. "Our boys were ridiculed every game", Murray remembers "We did stats on the games and every game it could be as high as 50 free kicks against us to 10 for us. How can that happen in a game? But it was every game!" (Murray, 2021)

The severity of penalties and reports imposed on Rumbalara began too in its first season with a very tough penalty imposed on 14 year old Geoffrey West. Rumbalara began what would become a routine series of objections to the fairness of the tribunal process and to the denial of natural justice.(Football, 1997; Hussey, 1997).

It would have been easy to bunker down into a reactionary position. Guided by the temperament of the Cummergunja and 'Flats' men and women, who had shown the way forward in even tougher eras, that has never been the feeling at Rumbalara Football and Netball Club . No matter who you are or where you come from you are welcome. Even for those whose ancestors perpetuated the worst crimes there is a feeling of welcome based on what you are feeling in your heart. There is always the possibility of turning a new page, creating a new level of harmony and friendship. This feeling of inclusiveness has created some firm non-Aboriginal family members.

Dallas Terlich played an important role in the consolidation of Rumbalara in the early years. A non-drinking, non-smoking non-Aboriginal chaplain of Shepparton high school. Terlich was about to play for for Katandra when he was stunned at the hostile-

ity against Rumbalara. Terlich said that most of the Goulburn Valley community was waiting - and hoping - for the club to fall over when it finally was affiliated to a competition after almost 15 years of knockbacks. In contrast Rumbalara were exemplary. Sport and health were the watchwords of the early club and these became the pathways towards the formation of the Academy of Sports, Health and Education (ASHE) and a whole host of health, employment and education programs run through the club. (Roberts, 1998)

Rumbalara is much more than football and netball. It is a place of cultural strength, comfort and safety. It is an employment agency. It is a mental health unit. It is a cultural centre. It is a youth centre, a woman's group, a homework and education club and much more. As Uncle Col remarked 'without Rumba the kids would be walking the streets'.

In 2022 the sight of Eddie Betts, heavily marked but still mercurial, rising for screamers and darting away from his opponents, brought back memories and reminiscences. He was an inspiration for players and fans from all sides. "I never thought I would umpire in a game with Eddie Betts" said young Bailey Wilson who ran the boundary and saw Bett's pull down a screamer. (See the mark at Yokayi Footy, 8.49 minutes in <https://www.afl.com.au/ondemand/shows/490963/yokayi-footy?episode=7#season-2022>)

By now it should be obvious why Eddie Betts came to Rumbalara for no match fee and ahead of many other offers? After 17 years in the AFL Eddie said he wanted to come home to community. The wider Goulburn Valley population still resist the idea of an Aboriginal club, they want Aboriginal players to play within the existing teams. In other words, the wider community is prepared to accommodate a group of Aboriginal stars and entertainers so long as they are their stars. Rumbalara is about something more. Just as non-Aboriginal clubs welcome Aboriginal players, Rumba welcomes non-Aboriginal players and members but it is a club with an Aboriginal identity and spirit. It is a place for First

Nations people to gather in comfort and safety. That was a big reason why Eddie Betts came to play for Rumba.

In the clubhouse after the game the powerful family feeling was apparent. Rumbalara's senior side went down by 10 goals and only the u17s prevailed, in netball the results were similar. In defeat and victory the "invincible spirit" is alive at Rumbalara. What is the invincible spirit? This is not something that can be explained easily or understood all at once. The words "spiritual", "soft", "forgiving", "grace", "hospitable", "exciting". "magic" are sometimes used to describe it". When you are defeated, you are not humbled; when people do the wrong thing you are not bowed and are strong enough to always do the right thing. The 'invincible spirit' allows you to see opportunities in adversity, it keeps your feet on the earth and yet you reach for the sky, makes you ready to take that high mark or make that leap in goal attack or defence, magic in the moment, spirit of the mighty Dungala and Kaiela rivers flowing through you.

The next phase is for the Munarra Centre for Regional Excellence to be built next to the football club. Munarra's goal is to bring Aboriginal living standards up to parity with the mainstream community. Driving this, the region would benefit by hundreds of millions of dollars if Aboriginal people participated more equally in economic, cultural and political life. [(Measuring Success)(<https://trove.nla.gov.au/work/34485180>)) Project, E. (2005). Finally, thank you Eddie Betts you are a true champion.

**Information in this article was compiled as part of the Kaiela Institute's "Invincible Spirit" Project which includes written and oral sources of information about the history and heritage of the Rumbalara Football and Netball Club. All rights reserved Kaiela Institute and Rumbalara Football and Netball Club 2022.**

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Eddie Betts, Paul Briggs, Col  
Walker, Rumbalara FNC, April 22,  
2022

