

# The Australian Football League – an effective mechanism for grass roots human rights promotion and practice

By Neda Monshat



AFL CEO Andrew Demetriou addresses the audience during the 2010 Annual Lecture

When it comes to crossing socio-economic, racial and religious divides, Australian Rules Football is ‘the great leveller’, according to AFL Chief Executive Officer Andrew Demetriou, who presented this year’s Castan Centre Annual Lecture at the State Library of Victoria.

733,000 people currently participate in Australian rules football so there is no doubt that the AFL has far-reaching links to countless communities across the country. Mr Demetriou spoke of human rights as a priority for the AFL, and the ways in which the AFL was realising its immense potential in human rights promotion and practice at the grass roots level. The audience heard of the numerous programs and initiatives implemented by the AFL aimed at community cohesion and equality. For example, the growing ‘Ladder’ joint initiative between the AFL Players Association and AFL Foundation tackles youth homelessness through a mentoring program. In addition, the AFL Multicultural Program, which has twelve full time multicultural officers working across all states, assists migrant and refugee communities to access Australian Rules Football. The Program has been implemented in over 100 schools and has led to 21,000 people visiting an AFL game.

Mr Demetriou went on to tell of the many struggles and ‘painful experiences’ that the AFL has encountered in its 113 year history, and the role that it has played in gradually transforming it into a

more tolerant and inclusive competition. Recounting the refusal of Nicky Winmar and Michael Long to accept racial taunts, Mr Demetriou claimed that the development of the *Racial and Religious Tolerance Policy*, a first for Australian sport, has meant that players from all backgrounds can no longer be discriminated against by reason of race. In answering a question from the audience as to the effectiveness of such policies, Mr Demetriou stated that although ‘football attitude’ could be extremely tough to change, that is no reason to give up. Pointing specifically to the Policy, Mr Demetriou contended that not only had attitudes within the game changed, but it had also become culturally unacceptable for fans sitting on the other side of the boundary to make racist remarks against players. Furthermore, the 11% participation rate of Indigenous Australians in the AFL and the development of young African players have been great achievements for the League.

Policies have now been extended against discrimination on the basis of gender, sexuality and disability. Mr Demetriou stated that one of the most important recent initiatives of the League has been the formulation of the *Respect and Responsibility* program. The program aims to create safe and inclusive environments for women at all levels of the game. With 48% of those attending games being women, two female commissioners, a woman on the executive and other women in commentating and umpiring roles, Mr Demetriou acknowledged the need for the AFL, with its strong emphasis on community and social responsibility, to promote respectful relationships between all individuals.

Mr Demetriou also pointed to the AFL’s potential to reach a worldwide audience. The breast cancer awareness raising *Field of Women* event this year saw 14,000 people ‘transform the MCG into a sea of pink’, with images of the spectacular scenes being published all around the world. In addition the AFL Peace Team, which consisted of a joint Palestinian and Israeli group of players, competed in the Australian Football International Cup in 2008, peacefully bringing together two traditionally conflicting groups through the sport.

Throughout his lecture, Mr Demetriou revealed the many great strides forward that the AFL has made in pursuit of its commitment to human rights. Deeply proud of these achievements, he also acknowledged that there was still much to be done by the League in order to continue moving forward. Mr Demetriou identified that the challenge now was for the AFL to work together with communities ‘toward real lasting change’ – ensuring greater opportunities at all levels of the game for women, Indigenous Australians, migrants and refugees. As a leading organisation in Australian sport, there is a real opportunity for the AFL to embrace diversity and inclusion, and understand the value of differences in every person. With its aims, as enunciated by Mr Demetriou, to be accountable, progressive and respectful, this opportunity can certainly be realised.

**The 2010 Annual Lecture was sponsored by Mallesons Stephen Jaques**