



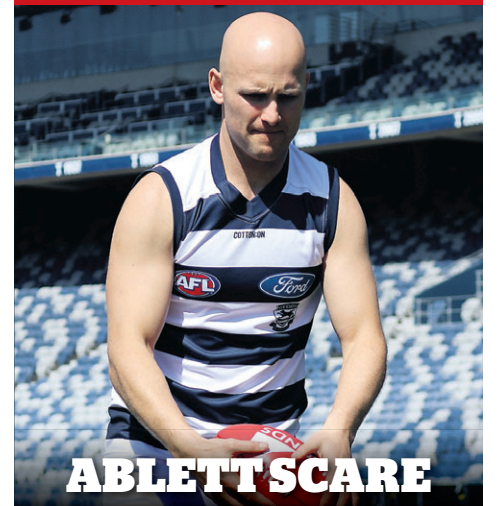
Suns co-captain Steven May on the Gold Coast this week.
Photo: Paul Harris



LONG MAY HE LEAD

The AFL's only indigenous captain finds his voice.
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Favourite Sun finds his voice

The AFL's only Indigenous captain opens up on early troubles, family matters, Kevin Rudd's apology and why Australia Day needs to change.

Michael Gleeson



Steven May sat at school assembly quietly seething. On the large screen at the front Kevin Rudd was saying sorry.

May was emotional and excited at the apology. Around him, his new schoolmates at Melbourne Grammar were not so pleased.

"I was sitting there listening to all the students around me saying, 'Why are we doing this shit? It's not our fault'. And I sat there quiet because I wasn't going to say anything, there was a thousand kids at my school and 80 per cent of them disagreed with the apology. I thought I am going to keep my mouth shut and just go about my business. It was my first week of school. I came down from Darwin and this school was massive. I wanted to fit in," the Gold Coast captain said, recalling that day 10 years ago.

"It wasn't their fault - they just didn't know any better. That was when I realised I had a role, not only as an athlete at the school but as an Indigenous athlete to educate the students. A lot of them didn't know, it was just ignorance, they didn't know what happened in the past, they didn't know what happens now. They are a lot from Toorak and that, they're just in their bubble."

Most of May's schoolmates were also unaware their new boarder was Indigenous. He looked like any other fair-skinned, fair-haired, blue-eyed kid at the South Yarra school. If his skin was a little more tanned than others it did not stand out among those who spent the summer at Portsea and winter in Europe.

"That was the hard bit, they would talk to me and not realise and I had to bite my tongue," he said. "I am trying to make friends and not have an argument and in my first week Kevin Rudd does the apology."

"I am sitting there in a time which is amazing and historic for our culture and I had to mask it and fit in. I hated that. That was really hard and that was the welcome to Melbourne."

May's mum has red hair and the complexion of a woman from Cork, not Kakadu. His dad was an

Indigenous man from WA. He took off when Steven was only a toddler then turned up again on the doorstep unannounced when he was 13. May told him to piss off. He couldn't come back 12 years later and expect a hug.

His dad died a few years ago and with him went the opportunity to ask a few questions May now would have liked answers to. He doesn't regret sending him away but misses those answers.

He didn't need an Indigenous dad around for him to grow up Indigenous. He had Patrick May. Patrick was an Indigenous man and a traditional owner of Larrakia land stretching from Darwin out towards Gunbalanya in Kakadu. He married Steven's grandma - his mum's mum - so out there in Kakadu and Darwin's fringe was where Steven's mum and her kids lived.

May is the AFL's only Indigenous captain. He is co-captain again with Tom Lynch, and is only the sixth Indigenous player to captain a club. He is proud of it and hopes it can help reshape the attitude to indigenous players as leaders.

"It is not something recruiters have looked for in indigenous players. They look for that X factor, not a captain," he said.

May was on an all-too-familiar path in Darwin. At 14, he was on charges for aggravated assault for an incident also involving his mate Troy Taylor.

Taylor was on a bond at the time

'I thought I am going to keep my mouth shut and just go about my business.'

Steven May

so the courts were not as forgiving of him as they proved to be of May. Taylor was recruited to Richmond but his history proved too difficult to overcome to make an AFL career.

At 15, May went to a schoolboys' footy championship in Sydney. He only went for the holiday and to see a big city but he came back with offers of footy scholarships.

He had been going to school one day in three in Darwin, had the court dates looming and knew football could be a path to change.



In Melbourne AFL recruiters were at every Associated Public Schools match.

"I had to make a massive call. I am the oldest of seven siblings now - I didn't have seven at the time. There was no man in the house. I had to make the decision. Mum was good. She knew I had to go, it was my best chance to get a good education and be seen by recruiters," he said.

The Rudd apology was a confronting early moment but not reflective of his experience at the school, which was overwhelmingly positive. In Darwin he was barely turning up at school. At Melbourne Grammar only the nurse's pass would let a boarder cut a break. They also expected you to train for football in the depth of winter before school, doing push-ups on your knuckles on frost-crusted ovals.

He flew back to Darwin for regular court dates and it was those hours in courtroom foyers waiting through adjournment after adjournment that steered a resolve not to make this his life. A reference from then headmaster Paul Sheahan saved him from jail and saved his football dream, May said.

"That was a big learning curve

after living on edge for a year. They would adjourn it and I had to go back to school for 10 weeks and come back to court again. You are sitting in the courthouse at eight o'clock and you sit there in the lobby for hours waiting to get on and then you are on for 10 minutes and it's adjourned.

"It worked out in the end because of the headmaster's reference, I reckon. I remember the judge saying 'I hope the whole process taught you something' and I thought 'yeah, I am not coming here again'."

He was drafted by the Suns as a 17-year-old priority player. The move to the Gold Coast after three years as a boarder made the transition easy.

He settled at the club and in his place in the team. He was in constant contact with his mum and siblings back in Darwin. She was still doing things fairly hard.

He flew home one break and picked the family up in a car. They drove through Darwin until, apparently randomly, he pulled up outside a house.

"Why we stopping here?" his mum asked.

May nodded towards the gate. There was a red ribbon on it.

"It's yours," he said.

He had left Darwin but not the family.

For his first years at the Suns he felt like those early days at Melbourne Grammar. He wanted to shut up and fit in, and let others lead.

"The penny dropped for me after a few years and I thought, why can't I do it?" he said.

The leadership was two-fold for him. He wanted to lead the club and lead the Indigenous players. Like at school, many in AFL were unaware of May's Indigenous heritage at first.

"I suppose it would be better if I was bit darker so people would know, but that doesn't change anything, the boys know," he said. "But I am the same. I see boys who are light-skinned and I didn't know they were Indigenous and you find out from one of the AFL maps and now when you see them it's 'how you going brother?'"

Last year he wore No. 67 on his back during the Indigenous round to recognise the 50-year anniversary of the referendum on Aboriginal voting. He approached his co-captain Lynch and told him he was going to wear it. He asked if Lynch would wear the 50. Lynch was enthusiastic. He gets it.

The numbers started

Demons keen to keep Alice games

Jon Pierik

Melbourne have declared they would like to host Adelaide or Port Adelaide annually in Alice Springs the week leading into the Sir Doug Nicholls round.

AFL, Demons and government officials were at Desert Park in Alice Springs yesterday, where it was revealed the league's indigenous round would kick off in round 10, when the Demons host the Crows at Traeger Park, a week out from the official round dedicated to the contribution Aboriginal players have, and continue, to make to the sport.

By having a week-long celebration, it's hoped the round 11 matches, including Dreamtime at the G, take on even greater prominence.

The round-10 match will also have the added spice of being new Demon Jake Lever's first clash against his former side.

There will be also a curtain-raiser between the Central Australian Redtails, a representative football team that provides social engagement help through health and education programs for Aboriginal footballers in the Red Centre, and the Top End Storm, a representative team.

Demons chief executive Peter Jackson told *The Age* the clash against the Crows would be a way of strengthening the role football plays

in Alice Springs, and educational and work programs associated with the sport off it.

"I am really happy with where we have got to with this because it's the fourth game in Alice Springs. To be frank, we tried to kick it along a couple of years ago and we looked around the location and said, 'What an amazing unique location to play elite sport, why don't we try and build it up?'" he said.

The Demons are in the second and final year of their latest contract in partnership with the AFL and the Northern Territory government, where two matches a season are held in the NT. They will also host Fremantle in Darwin in round 16.

The NT government has contributed \$1.6 million annually to bring AFL to the region, with Jackson declaring an independent report showed the Demons helped to contribute \$3.5 million into the economy last year, with \$1 million of that into Alice Springs.

Jackson said the Demons were keen to continue at least playing in central Australia.

"I don't know if it will be Melbourne versus Crows but I would like to think it's regularly Melbourne. Both South Australian clubs have a very strong connection to the Northern Territory. We have played Port Adelaide up here before. I think if we [could] play at least one of them each year."

Davies-Uniacke ready to handle the heat

Jon Pierik

Having already shown "special traits" at training, Luke Davies-Uniacke will look to show the wider football world why he was such a coveted draft selection when North Melbourne open the JLT Community series on Saturday.

The No. 4 pick in last year's draft, the Kangaroos' highest selection since they took Lachlan Hansen at No. 3 in 2006, Davies-Uniacke has been named on the interchange for the clash against Melbourne in Hobart.

Coach Brad Scott has spoken about what he believes are the special traits the former Dandenong Stingray boasts, while teammates can see why Davies-Uniacke was a high draft pick in the way he handles congestion.

"Luke is a really good player - you can see why he was so highly touted. His work through traffic, sometimes you can hesitate, but he has got this natural ability through traffic," teammate Ed Vickers-Willis said.

"But Luke is in the same boat as the rest of us. Just because he is a first-rounder, it doesn't mean he is guaranteed a round-one spot. But he has definitely come in and put his head down, which is what you want to see from a high draft pick. Being a high draft pick hasn't fazed him or gone to his head. He just works hard and has shown what he can do as a footballer with instinct."

Vickers-Willis, named in the ini-

tial 30-man squad and hoping to lock down a spot in defence, said the tall and strong-bodied Davies-Uniacke would spend time through the mid-field and up forward.

"He is a solid boy for an 18-year-old. Luke plays well forward and is strong overhead, similar to what Jack [Ziebell] and Ben Cunnington have done in the past," he said.

"I would imagine he will spend some time forward and learn his craft there and this year or next year see some more midfield minutes."

Ziebell had a delayed start to the pre-season because of toe surgery and the collarbone and rib injuries he endured last year but the inspirational captain will lead his team at Kingston Twins Oval.

"He is looking really fit. He had some injury troubles early on in the pre-season . . . but he is running well and all the boys are really behind him and what the leadership group are trying to do. We are just trying to build that trust within each other," Vickers-Willis said.

Paul Ahern, having had a run in AFLX last week, will step up his comeback from two knee reconstructions in 2016.

Luke McDonald, having forged a career as a defender, has been named at half-forward, with the Roos intent on developing his game.

Veteran ruckman Todd Goldstein has been given the No. 1 ruck role, having impressed over summer after a 2017 campaign where he struggled to deal with a marriage breakdown.

Suns co-captain Steven May on the Gold Coast this week. Photo: Paul Harris

conversations with players there like they had with his schoolmates. When Australia Day came around he bought into the change-the-date push.

May advocates the change and explains to any teammates who are uncertain what the fuss is about that celebrating on that day is like having a party on Anzac Day. For Indigenous people January 26 symbolises the start of the frontier wars and is not a day to celebrate.

"I understand why people don't want to change because they were not directly involved in what happened," he said.

"It's just that you are celebrating good things about Australia but you are doing it on the date that led to a lot of people being slaughtered. And it's just nobody knows that.

"It's the same as the apology - why are we doing this? Why are we changing the date?"

"How great would it be if we had other dates when great things happened. If everyone could celebrate on that day, how good would that be? The conversation is growing legs every year; it'll change."

The more common conversations at the club are not

so profound. They are about new coaches, a new culture and a step past the year of questions about Gary Ablett and Rodney Eade.

Stuart Dew, he said, was a relationships coach, who builds the bond with the player first then worries about the tactical stuff, but the tactical stuff is there.

'It is not something recruiters have looked for in Indigenous players. They look for that X factor, not a captain.'

"It was a bit of a circus last year . . . Rocket was out of contract so they are saying you haven't re-signed and Gaz, your best player, is not playing [away games] what is going on? We had a bad year but that wasn't the reason. We didn't get a lot of things right on field.

"Until you can start putting wins on the board it's hard to prove you have changed."

The problem on the field was, he

said, that teams sieved through them so easily. They had recruited players with early picks who were stylish and daring but had no idea how to defend.

It meant May was a stay-at-home defender, too scared to run up the field for fear of the ball sailing back over his head to his free man.

This year he wants to be able to play more like Richmond's Alex Rance and Essendon's Michael Hurley, intercept marking and attacking.

"I was spending all my tickets defending. If I played like that last year the way we defended, my man would be loose out the back. Hopefully this year we're defending 50 inside-50s a game, not 70."

He knows what it is to change and grow up. He knows what it is to lead and have a loud, proud convincing voice.

This week the club had a telephone membership drive. May asked for a couple of numbers, in particular. He picked up the phone to Gil McLachlan and Richard Goyder. He convinced them to buy Suns memberships. For their whole families.

Steven May is very persuasive when he finds his voice.