

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN'S AMERICAN DREAM *plus* TANYA PLIBERSEK TALKS POLITICS

Good Weekend

OCTOBER 31, 2020

SATURDAY
THE AGE



PRAYERS AT
HALF-TIME

—
FASTING FOR
A MONTH EACH
SEASON

—
NO BOOZY
VICTORY
CELEBRATIONS

Bachar Houli is quietly broadening what it means to be an Aussie rules star *BY Konrad Marshall*

ON A FLANK AND A PRAYER

Bachar Houli entered the AFL 14 years ago as its first orthodox Muslim. With the quiet strength of his faith and the beauty of his play, he's changed the way the game understands itself.

STORY BY *Konrad Marshall*
PHOTOGRAPH BY *Michael Willson*



Despite eschewing boozy bonding sessions, Bachar Houli, pictured in last weekend's grand final, has been integral to Richmond's three recent premierships.

GETTY IMAGES

ALITTLE more than a year ago, on the day of the 2019 AFL grand final, Bachar Houli awoke at 3am. The champion Richmond half-back flank rose in darkness not over big-game jitters, or the need to pee, or a teething toddler, but out of religious obligation. He roused himself to pray.

Houli, 32, is the first practising orthodox Muslim to play in the Australian Football League. And although his commitment to Islam is almost reflexively characterised by others as “devout”, few fully grasp what that means in daily life. Allow me to elucidate.

Houli rubbed the sleep from his eyes, knelt in supplication, and began to sing from the Koran, offering a special night prayer – the *tahajjud* – performed in those peaceful hours when Allah descends closest to earth. Then he went back to bed, rising two hours later to drive to his local mosque in Newport, in Melbourne's inner west, to pray again at 5.30am. Houli then returned home, relaxed with his wife, Rouba, and made time to pray once more, later that morning.

Past noon, he made his way across the West Gate Bridge to the Melbourne Cricket Ground, where his skill and strength played a starring role in the Tigers' decisive early mauling of the Greater Western Sydney Giants.

At half-time, instead of attending the defenders' strategic line meeting, Houli was alone in a small anteroom used by AFL drug testers, first making *wudu* – the ritualistic ablutions required prior to prayer – then locating Mecca with his iPhone, and kneeling on a towel, bowed in prayer. He went back onto the field, won his second storied premiership medallion, then danced on the grass with his daughters before surreptitiously slipping away, back to that anteroom, to pray yet again.

The post-match celebrations in the bowels of the MCG naturally turned heady, as beer and champagne and screaming and singing spread throughout the sprawling underground. One by one the players chanted to each other to “Skol! Skol! Skol!”, the subject dutifully drinking deeply from cans of Carlton Draught. When it was time for “Ba-char! Ba-char! Ba-char!” to drink, Houli held a bottle of water above his head and guzzled it greedily, drenching his shaved scalp in the last clear splashes.

After showering, he put on his suit, sang the club song again, then disappeared to pray once more. While the team departed for raucous celebrations at a nearby hotel, Houli had dinner with his family at a local restaurant, then went home to bed. Before he closed his eyes on Saturday, September 28, 2019, he prayed for the seventh time that day.

Waleed Aly, who worked with Houli on his upcoming memoir, *Bachar Houli: Faith, Football and Family*, says it's this sort of uncomplicated religious devotion – performing ordinary obligations on the most extraordinary of days – that makes Houli not only a crucial figure for the Islamic community, but perhaps the perfect bridge to wider Australia.

“If part of what you're trying to manifest is the possibility of being authentically Muslim and authentically Australian, then having someone who strikes you as a compromised figure wouldn't do the job. Bachar doesn't strike anyone as a compromised figure,” says Aly, a co-host of Network Ten's *The Project* and columnist for *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*. “He understands the community, and is anchored in it. And he is on a stage and in an environment that no one else from that world has been in. It opens up possibility, and creates a direct link between these hitherto separate parts of Australian society.”

It matters that people know he does the daily prayers, fasts at Ramadan, abstains from alcohol, and that he doesn't resile from those values for the sake of convenience. “It sends a message to the community that, ‘Well, it must be possible,’” says Aly. “That we're not automatically excluded.”

Houli has been thrust into the spotlight many times in his life and career, from entering the league as a shy

trailblazer, to leveraging that status into prayer rooms being established at all AFL venues in 2012. From leading his educational not-for-profit Bachar Houli Foundation, to staring down racial abuse from Aussie rules fans. From visiting the victims of the 2019 Christchurch mosque massacre, to using his mother's COVID-19 diagnosis to call on Australian Muslims to get tested. “Yet what's interesting about Bachar is not so much the events in his life,” notes Aly, “but the way he responds to them.”

IVE MET Bachar Houli many times, but never like this, on FaceTime, me in my home office in Melbourne and he in the Richmond hub on the Gold Coast, where the club has cloistered together for more than 100 days, to protect an AFL season played in a pandemic.

This Tuesday, on the eve of finals, he's meant to be on an RDO but his schedule is hardly relaxing. A keen angler (as well as hunter and camper), Houli has just finished delivering a Zoom presentation about resilience to the Victorian Fisheries Authority, for which he's an ambassador. (“Everyone is going through some sort of test – it's about looking for ways to overcome it,” he told them. “I don't have all the answers, but I've got a couple: live life simply, and with humility.”) A little earlier, he was in a meeting with Victorian sports minister Martin Pakula, helping a funding push for the planned William Cooper Centre: a \$60 million education and diversity hub for Richmond's Punt Road headquarters, hoping to break ground in 2021. It would also become the permanent home of the Bachar Houli Foundation, which runs Islamic school footy carnivals, employment programs, leadership courses, and has in nine years reached about 35,000 kids nationwide.

“It was set up to correct an imbalance – there just aren't enough Muslims playing the game,” says his friend and the foundation director, Ali Fahour. “If you ask Bachar what the goal is, he just wants young boys and girls to be proud of their identity. But we also want to see them building bridges, educating the wider community, and then getting more kids drafted, because sporting role models are just so powerful.”

Houli was the first strict adherent of the faith to play the game, joined five years ago by now-Essendon player Adam Saad. While a handful of less observant Muslims like Sedat Sir and Adam Yze came before this duo, what excites Fahour is what's coming down the line. “We've got three kids coming through the academy right now – absolute jets – who we'll be pushing hard to be drafted.”

After a short meeting with some of those very kids online – Houli's third Zoom of the day – he's finally online with me, talking about “hub life”, which is repetitive and stifling but eased by having his family with him, including daughters Sarah, 6, and Maryam, 3, and baby boy Mohamed, who was born in July. Houli stayed in Melbourne for the birth, forgoing half the season to support Rouba, whom he married at 20, and says that time was a blessing, from daily family bike rides to Bunnings runs. He remembers holding his son as soon as he was born, and softly singing the call to prayer – the *adhan* – in his right ear, and then a different version – the *iqamah* – in his left, so that Mohamed's first moments were anchored in faith.

“Right now, I'm energised,” he says, teeth gleaming. “There's a lot of positivity. This place is full of banter, full of happiness, and there's a lot of confidence. We'll remember this year together no matter what happens on the field. It's not about the prize.” He turns quiet. “But I have struggled at times. I miss home. I miss my mum.”

His mother, Yamama, 68, who lives close by Houli, fell at home in the week after the birth, hurting her ribs. Houli's older brother Nezor, a pancreatic surgeon, booked her in for X-rays and – worried by her shortness of breath – a COVID-19 test, which came back positive. “The worst sound in the world,” Bachar writes in his memoir, “is someone you love bawling down a phone line.” It was his sister Marwa, calling as their mum was wheeled into intensive care.



From far left: Houli and Waleed Aly at an iftar dinner with then PM Malcolm Turnbull; with wife Rouba, with whom he has three children; with parents Malek and Yamama, who wanted Bachar to focus on his education, not sport.

One of the literal meanings of the word Islam is “surrender”, which is all Houli could do. “We were very strong as a family – united and connected – but we belong to God and we shall return to God,” he says, nodding. “A lot of us go through life but rarely remember death – that which will destroy our pleasures – so I always prepare for that moment.”

Yamama is much better now. After a frightening month, her health improved steadily and Houli rejoined his team in Queensland. He also used that moment. One of the shortcomings in Victoria’s pandemic management was reaching diverse language groups, so Houli broadcast a highly personal video on Facebook and Instagram, which has been viewed 24 million times. “Change your mindset about COVID-19,” he pleaded. “The reality is it is out there, and I’m experiencing it right now within my family. Please, I urge you, for the sake of Allah, to go get tested.”

He wasn’t seeking sympathy or asking for prayers, only for people to recognise the problem. “It wasn’t scripted. I just let it flow,” he says, seeming saintly on my screen, in his white T-shirt and a white curtain backdrop. “It was an important time to stand up and share awareness. It’s not hard to go and get tested. I’ve done it more than 50 times.”

His mum still hasn’t met Mohamed. “I can’t wait to get back home, just to reunite with her,” Houli says. “There’s gonna be some tears, both ways.”

SOME PEOPLE play football as they live life. Bachar Houli is a star: strong, balanced and graceful. His kicking action is pure. His adherence to the plan is absolute. He seems born to footy, yet it was not encouraged in his youth in Altona North in Melbourne’s inner west.

“My parents were very strict – let’s be straight about that,” he says, grinning and wagging a finger. “Distraction from education was the number one reason they were against footy. They moved here from Lebanon because they wanted us to have a better life. The idea of sport was wasteful.”

But they didn’t really have time to stop young Bachar. His dad, Malek, drove long hours in a taxi, and Yamama was focused on the meals needed for seven children. Houli doesn’t remember how he was introduced to football, only that when holding a new Sherrin he would sniff the leather, inhaling its sacred incense.

He went to his first AFL game when he was 11. Carlton versus Collingwood at the MCG. He and a friend plunged into the middle of the infamous “Grog Squad” of Carlton supporters. He remembers being thrown into the air by grown men, the noise and colour and joy leaving an indelible mark on his spirit.

He learnt to play that year, too, getting through an entire season with his local junior club in Spotswood without his parents knowing. The deception only unravelled when he won their best and fairest award, as

well as the league’s best and fairest award, and the league’s top goalkicker award. He was sprung while trying to smuggle three trophies into his home that night.

There was no eruption from his parents, but footy became a stalemate issue, neither forbidden nor endorsed, which only changed for Malek when his son was selected in Victorian state sides at 15. Yamama was tougher to crack. “The moment I knew she was fully invested was...two years into my AFL career? She said, ‘Why don’t you get a bit stronger, go in for that ball more? I always find you on the outside,’” he says, laughing. “She started giving me advice!”

In 2006 he was drafted by Essendon, aged 18 and at pick 42, yet more stories were written about Houli than all but the very best young recruits. The attention was difficult. This was not long after the London Tube bombings, and the Operation Pendennis antiterrorism raids in Sydney and Melbourne. Anti-Muslim anxiety was high.

“I was just a young lad willing to do whatever it takes to play – I didn’t think about representing this large community. But as people remind you, you start realising you’re representing something greater than yourself. I tried to live in the moment. But I also tried to live everything I preached. If I was going to say, ‘I’m a Muslim and I pray five times a day,’ I had to do it.”

Fahour was working at Essendon when Houli was drafted, and well remembers the difficulty he had fitting in, declining invites to go out carousing at bars. He was lucky, in some ways, to have

been drafted by the inclusive Kevin Sheedy. “I’m not sure the industry would have been ready for a practising Muslim in the ‘80s and ‘90s,” Fahour says. “Would they have accepted him fasting during Ramadan? I really doubt it would have been embraced.”

Waleed Aly doesn’t barrack for Essendon, but he was present for Houli’s debut in 2007. “I remember being nervous, like I had something major at stake,” Aly writes in his foreword to Houli’s book. “I called for him to run into open space. I tensed as he held that mark. I pumped my fists as he kicked that goal. That was me out there.”

Houli is an ornament to the game now – All Australian in 2019, and close to best on ground in two premierships wins – but he was in and out of the side over his first few years and bore the anxiety of expectation. “I struggled, because it wasn’t just me not playing, it was ‘Bachar Houli the Muslim’ not playing. It felt like I was letting much more than myself down.”

THAT CHANGED in 2011 when he left the Bombers to join Richmond, where he’s since played 194 games, including the 2020 grand final, as a crucial member of a

vaunted defence. More importantly, he found a place to be firm about his faith. Houli finds it unsettling to be around alcohol, for instance – as if wronging himself by attending club functions, or “Mad Monday” celebrations – so was given club blessing to step away from that discomfort. His friend and captain, Trent Cotchin, says Houli never compromises himself. “Which is really admirable, because so many people come into an AFL system, let alone a new team, and want to change to fit in, rather than be themselves. Bachar is just Bachar.”

At Tigerland he found himself answering so many player questions about Islam – from why prayer draws him closer to God, to the difference between Sunni and Shia – that he now does an annual presentation to all staff. They also hold an annual iftar dinner at the Islamic Museum of Australia during Ramadan. That was the brainchild of Richmond’s diversity and inclusion co-ordinator, Rana Hussain, also a Muslim and who is also currently working with NBA star Ben Simmons on his “DoMore” anti-racism campaign.

“When Bachar’s career began I followed everything he did, not just to see him play but to see how he manoeuvred through this industry that felt like a monoculture,” Hussain says. “I remember him visiting an Islamic school one day – he was just mobbed. It was like when you see One Direction or something,” she adds with a laugh. “For a while, before he got married, he was the most eligible bachelor in the Muslim community.”

Ramadan, incidentally, is an incredibly serious undertaking for a professional athlete. Houli was only able to navigate it successfully – forgoing food and water every day for a month from the first hint of dawn to the moment the sun dips below the horizon – with trial and error. He eats the right carbs at night and hydrates before daybreak. He consulted Islamic scholars, too, discovering dispensations for “travellers” (affording him leeway when playing interstate). If he absolutely has to break his fast on game day with a handful of dates, he’ll fast another day after Ramadan ends, then make a charitable *fidyah* payment to clear his conscience.

Praying, too, became an issue of great importance. Every Muslim in a minority country knows the prickling discomfort as the clock ticks by while trying to find somewhere to pray. When Houli was 14, he used the scrub behind the club rooms. He once prayed in the commotion of the Royal Melbourne Show. Another time, next to his car on the shoulder of a freeway. The most uncomfortable place? An airport transit lounge.

Richmond cleared a special room in its facility for prayer when Houli arrived in 2011. When he became one of the AFL’s multicultural ambassadors the following

year, the first point he lobbied then-boss Andrew Demetriou for was prayer rooms at arenas. He remembered what it was like to invoke Allah in a dank stadium stairwell, the concrete stinking of spilt beer. Simon Matthews, Richmond’s communications and community program boss, points out that Houli achieves all these little goals quietly, mostly without xenophobic backlash or crusader self-promotion. “Bachar can do for Muslim Australians what Michael Long did for Indigenous Australians,” Matthews says. “He’s that important.”

CROWD NOISE is mostly white noise to footballers, but not this night in 2016 against Collingwood. Houli stood behind Maggie goals in the second quarter, and a voice from the stands cut through: “Hey, you jihadist!” They made eye contact. Houli shook his head. He didn’t want to react on instinct, instead pausing to consider the problem.

It was a difficult moment in a difficult time. Adam Goodes had only recently been booed out of football. Reclaim Australia was holding regular anti-Muslim protests. At the game that night against the Magpies, the United Patriots Front unveiled a banner: “Go Pies! Stop the mosques!”

Houli thought of the Prophet, and as his teammates left the field after a gutting loss, he hung back, then walked to the Collingwood cheer squad for a “gentle conversation”. This doesn’t surprise Tanya Hosch, the AFL’s inclusion and social policy manager. Hosch knows Houli’s manner well from his work this year on a committee expanding Rule 35, the racial vilification code, to include online abuse. “People might have Bachar on a pedestal, but there’s no rock-star air there,” she says. “He’s never looking to be the loudest voice. He actually holds a more powerful silence, in his ability to listen.”

A crowd gathered. Friends of the man apologised, and chastised him as a drunken fool. Others wanted to report him to security, or the league. “Stop, please, everyone. Just relax,” Houli said. “I’m going to be a different person. I’m going to teach you something. Islam is not a religion of destruction. Islam’s a religion of peace. A religion of tolerance.” He spoke for five minutes, answering questions, shaking hands.

“I felt like I had a clear heart, and when you have a clear heart you shouldn’t fear anything,” he tells me now, days before a preliminary final against Port Adelaide. “That kind of thing was always going to happen eventually. My role was to respond to it well – not to respond to harm with harm. Because where does that end?”

He knew he could have had the man ejected, or banned from the cheer squad. The AFL wanted to take action, and Collingwood president Eddie McGuire, too, but Houli had given his abuser his word he would leave the matter there. There it stayed.

“The thing is, Bachar always comes back to celebrating, and sharing himself. That’s everything he’s about,” says Cotchin. “He just saw it as an opportunity to educate, instead of annihilate.”

SIX DAYS before the start of the 2019 AFL season, Bachar Houli was in the massage room at Richmond, getting a rub down before training. Flicking through the news on his phone, he saw a garbled video feed. “It looked like one of those first-person shooter games,” he says, squinting. “Then this little boy, Mucad, was killed. He was three. Just defenceless. Just...”

He was watching the Christchurch mosque massacre, in which 51 people were murdered during Friday prayers. Houli went straight to the office of development coach Ivan Maric and started to cry. He had to go home to his family. “When you have a child who pleads with you every single night, ‘Dad, Dad, Dad, can I go with you to the mosque?’ that’s what resonated with me,” he says. “My daughter always wants to get into her clothing and stand next to me and pray, and that’s exactly what that kid was doing.”

He went home and held her tightly. He posted on Instagram that fear would not keep him from his place

of worship, then headed to the mosque. A few days later, he was on a plane to New Zealand, invited by Khoder Nasser, the manager of National Rugby League star Sonny Bill Williams, to mourn the victims and pay respects. He toured mosques and hospitals and homes and was, according to Nasser, a soothing presence. “He wasn’t in unfamiliar territory. He was simple and natural and comforting. No intrusion. No one would feel like he was in a place where he didn’t belong.”

Houli went to the burial services of 27 souls, met wounded survivors, and spoke to the older brother of little Mucad, at a local ice-cream shop. He sighs now, and describes the event as “shocking, just shocking” – then says something I’m not expecting.

“The reality is if you die in a mosque, you’re dying in a state of worship, and there’s no better way of dying than while serving the true purpose of your life, to serve the Creator,” he says flatly. “Dying in prayer, on a Friday, the holiest day, you are considered a martyr – a person who is not in a state of war but in a struggle with their own self, abstaining from what’s against the law of God. That’s martyrdom, that’s jihad. They were in a good place. They were the lucky ones.”

The reaction stuns me, underlining the collision between my sheltered understanding of religious norms (and my atheism, too) and his end-of-life beliefs. Houli’s is actually a fairly conventional Islamic perspective.



On the field with daughters Sarah and Maryam.

“This life isn’t the be all and end all,” Aly explains. “In Islam there’s a greater cosmic way of understanding events and hardships – an understanding that has a much larger conception of what might be good for us in the long run. And I think that way of looking at the world has helped Bachar.”

THREE YEARS ago, I met Bachar Houli, while writing a book about Richmond, at the Bilal Bin Rabah Masjid, a cavernous \$14 million mosque in inner-Melbourne Newport. I remember teens in *taqiyah* (skull caps) and others in Nike baseball hats, and older men in high-vis tradie vests, or blue shirts with the telltale epaulettes of the taxi service. Houli often performs the call to prayer here. His sheik asks him to, because he has a beautiful voice. “If you’ve got a certain quality, you should utilise it – not to show off, but so you can draw the hearts of others,” Houli says. “People ask me about playing in front of 100,000 people, or leading the prayer for 600 people. Leading the prayer is more nerve-racking, because behind you there are rows of people who’ve memorised those passages – the whole book.”

Those people – now largely locked down at home – were front of mind when Houli was interviewed on television after the Tigers’ semi-final win against St

Kilda three weeks ago. With flecks of grass still stuck to his scalp, and sweat dripping from his thick beard, he smiled down the barrel of the camera: “I just want to say, I love you Mum, *As-salamu alaykum* [Peace be upon you]. *As-salamu alaykum* to all the community back home. Stay patient.”

Nazeem Hussain, the comedian and actor of *Legally Brown* fame, was one of many who beamed at home as that message was broadcast. “That’s Channel 7, the same network where you have all sorts of commentators saying racist stuff,” Hussain says, “and then you have this Muslim guy with a broad smile sending a message in Arabic to the Islamic community. Bachar is one of the only reasons I watch AFL, and he doesn’t even play for my team!”

Houli once told me he’d be happy to retire if he won a premiership. He doesn’t play for the love of the game – he doesn’t feel that anymore. “When I was a young kid, yes, you crave it. But it becomes a job, and it’s super competitive, and I’m not a competitive person. I don’t crave the battle. I’m just this peacemaker, mate. Let me play the game and come home and enjoy life.”

He will know when it’s time to retire. God will tell him. He’s asked that question of the Almighty before, immediately after a disastrous 2016 season. His end-of-season trip was the Haj – the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca – to stand on Mount Arafat with Rouba, where Adam and Eve are said to have met on earth after being cast from paradise. In 46-degree heat, with 2.5 million pilgrims in glowing white gowns, he spent the day asking for forgiveness and advice. “Allah, if football is meant for me, then allow it to be and show me the path towards it,” he whispered. “Help me make a decision and give me what’s best for me.”

He wasn’t asking for anything more than to allow good to flourish and bad to vanish. “There was so much mercy in the air, so much feeling and positivity. You’re like a newborn baby. I felt really good after that. I felt clear. And things began to fall into place.”

Did they ever. Houli won a storied flag in 2017, then another in 2019, and in Brisbane last weekend, he gathered a third premiership medallion. A day later, sitting in the cafe of the Richmond hub at Royal Pines Resort on the Gold Coast, he tells me over FaceTime about the game that secured his team that third historic win.

About the way he injured his calf in the first quarter and was asked by coach Damien Hardwick to endure – with strapping, painkillers, adrenalin and devotion, to play a purely defensive role: “Mate, I need you. I need you to hang in. I need Allah on our side.”

About his creeping doubts at half time, when Geelong was dominating – but also the positivity of the coaches, and how the game began to pivot into the “controlled chaos” mode of untrammelled play the Tigers love: “It’s a special feeling. When it’s happening we just turn around to each other, full of smiles and celebration.”

About winning, and hugging Joel Selwood, the warrior Cats captain, who was left with little to say: “Too good. You guys are too bloody good.”

About taking little Mohamed and Maryam and Sarah on stage to collect his medal, and celebrating on the sodden oval, then going to bed after midnight, waking again to his alarm at 3:30am. “I got up like someone had given me an electric shock. I was just so pumped.”

In the wake of that grand final win, Houli planned to sign a new contract, fly home, kiss his mother’s feet and introduce her to her grandson. But for now, finally free of the AFL hub isolation, he headed to the mosque, his first visit in four months, for the 4am congregational prayer. There were five people there, and social distancing tape marked the floor. “I missed it so much. The feeling of that was ... better than winning the grand final ... The satisfaction I get spiritually outweighs any cup.”

He knows, though, that the medals are meaningful. “With achievement comes opportunity,” Houli says, nodding. “And this is my opportunity – to reach people, and share a message of positivity about Islam. That’s what winning means to me.” ■