



ChimDingo Publishing – Motivational

“Respect & Fitting In Culturally – TI (Thursday Island) Rugby League”

Authors Note: This is a real life example from my young days about how to earn respect in a different culture.

Let's talk about respect, fitting into a different culture and being a minority instead of the majority. The only way to gain respect is to earn it by your deeds, actions and conduct. It defines what sort of person you are.

I spent 4.5 years in the Torres Strait from 1979-1984 on Thursday Island (Waiben) off the tip of Cape York. I originally transferred up there with the National Bank when I was twenty years old and completed a trade apprenticeship as a fitter and in marine outboards after I had to leave the bank. That's another interesting story as was the whole experience up there. At the time there were about 5,000 inhabitants including a few hundred whitefellas. It was actually between Wednesday Island and Friday Island (no kidding and was our favourite joke when asked where it was). There was also Tuesday Island. These were the days Captain Cook sailed to them after Possession Island where he claimed the east coast of Australia for England in 1770.

I decided to join one of the local rugby league teams; the Royal Arafura Dragons who wore the St. George strip. This was a bit of a daunting exercise as there were very few white players in any of the teams, the majority being Torres Strait Islanders, a few Aboriginals and Papua New Guineans. The ground didn't have much grass on it either and was like concrete. It was very close to the hospital which was handy ¹. I never got seriously hurt surprisingly unlike many others who suffered broken bones. This was also a good exercise in overcoming fears, I was pretty shit scared those first few games though I tried not to show it. A few years down the track there were a lot more whitefellas playing but in the early days we were a novelty.



I was the only white guy (marrakai) in my team and the island boys hammered the crap out of me the first few games to see what I was made of. I did score a try in my first game. I was a skinny 75 kgs in those days with long legs and big boots and they'd put a kick up and several guys would tackle me whether I had the ball or not or they'd fling me over the sideline like a rag-doll to the cheers of the spectators. Even my own team-mates didn't do a lot to protect me in those early games. I was in for a torrid baptism of fire. The policeman and the teacher playing for the Grand Tigers used to get a bit of treatment as well. It was open season basically for anyone looking for an ego boost. The spectators sat on old telephone poles laid alongside the field or on the trays of their trucks and station-wagons.

As I used to play outside centre and wing they used to throw small rocks at me from the sideline and hiss at me the local island women and call out in their best pigeon, “hey goofy you for run”, “we see you after”, “bring on some fresh meat”, “you fla stick leg”, all accompanied by wild laughter. They were having a good time.

¹ We have a footy term “hospital pass” that means someone gives you a terrible pass that is likely to land you in hospital.

To give you some of the other background these were the early days of a more radical approach to indigenous affairs and there was a small under-current of anti-white sentiment but more so the desire for autonomy or self-determination and apart from a few isolated incidents I never really experienced any reverse racism. Queensland was very much a “police” state in the 1970’s & early 1980’s with endemic corruption and institutional racism quite common and this didn’t help matters. The first time I went to the Royal pub, which was a fairly hard-core prefabricated hotel structure and who sponsored the team I later played for, I remember being baited for a fight the minute I walked in. I just laughed it off basically as even though I was skinny I was 6’4”. I later became friends with the two guys who tried it on.

In about my fourth game, against the Torres Eels, I tried to tackle a huge guy (from a very well known and respected island family of Japanese descent) and he ended up falling prostate on top of me and “winding” me pretty badly, like one of those cartoon scenes where you just see the legs and arms sticking out! Well eventually I got back up and kept on playing with some applause from the crowd. I also made some good tackles and took a few unprovoked punches and gave them back with interest. This game was a turning point and everyone must have decided that this tall skinny white boy had earned respect by sticking it out this long and showing some guts and things changed a lot. I was looked after by my own team more, accepted and invited into the community better and made some really good island friends.

The Royal Arafura Dragons played very attractive attacking football and played with heart. That first season we won the prestigious Jacky Mills shield and made the Grand Final having lost only one game to the Federal Magpies along the way, finishing as the minor premiers on top of the table. I got benched for the final having scored one of our only two tries in the semi-final but having bombed another one. We lost the Grand Final narrowly when we just had a bad day and made a few handling mistakes at crucial times. We were devastated but it was a good lesson for later in life; it’s important to know how to lose as well as how to win, it makes you stronger and able to handle the disappointments that come along in life sometimes.



There were some memorable moments throughout the seasons I played there ². Once the football, when kicked out, got stuck in a coconut tree. One of the local kids scaled the tree and some wag from the crowd yelled out, ‘Fuck the ball, throw down the coconuts’. The Bamaga guys used to travel over from the Mainland and pull up at the beach in “tinnies” (aluminium dinghies) get changed and run on; often late depending on the ocean conditions on the trip over. I always admired those guys and they had some bloody good footballers. We often travelled over to the Mainland to play their home game on rented pearling luggers with old fashioned diving helmets on the deck. You’ll have to read my book for the rest of the story on these. I also travelled as a support member for the Torres Strait Rugby League representative teams to Brisbane, Weipa and Gove in the Northern Territory.

You don’t have to be a superstar; you just give your best, the best you can with heart and guts and you will earn respect and trust. I always maintain from my playing days a team of ordinary players with a few talented players and lots of heart will always beat a team of stars who have no heart on any given day. I have experienced it first hand; it’s a hard feeling to beat winning as the underdog. Of course there are a few floggings along the way.

Sport is a great cultural intersection zone as it transcends religion, culture and countries and allows common ground to be found and frustrations, anger and energy to be fought out on the field. It was a bit more difficult in an alien culture but the lessons are the same for business, you must earn respect by the way you conduct yourself, by doing what you say and your integrity ³ and it doesn’t happen overnight. Remember too that you don’t have to like someone to respect them and vice versa. There’s nothing wrong with being hard either as long as you are fair and consistent.

² I played for the Royal, Torres (a premiership) & Federal over the four seasons and had one representative game at centre for Thursday Island.

³ I’ll talk about integrity in another article as I compromised mine once & learnt a lesson I have never forgotten.