

Wise counsel needed when AFL players cross the line



A fortnight ago I suggested footballers were not necessarily good role models and that, following the scandal surrounding St Kilda players and a Melbourne teenager, parents would “quake with fear” to hear their daughters were learning “life skills” from players. There were howls of protest from the football industry. And there was the reaction of everybody else.

Outside the football world these comments were regarded as pretty obvious. Of thousands who voted in online polls, support for my comments was two to one. One senior editor told me: “I don’t know anyone who disagrees with you.” Obviously he doesn’t listen to talkback radio.

The football industry – by which I mean the administrators, players, journalists and all those who earn their income one way or another from

professional football – was incensed. I hadn’t realised how many ex-players have radio shows until their producers rang wanting my response as they queued, one after the other, to berate me over the airwaves. Then TV reporters discovered that Collingwood players had criticised me on Twitter. They wanted to know how I responded to these tweets which they ran as news stories on the evening TV bulletins. The next day sports columnists were opining on my character and questioning whether I had any qualification (they decided I didn’t) to talk about philanthropy.

The AFL Players’ Association was murmuring about the need for an apology. The Professional Footballers’ Association demanded a meeting to set me straight.

The federal Sports Minister, Mark Arbib, jumped in to say that footballers make wonderful role models and to attack me. He wanted to ingratiate himself with the industry. Arbib was assistant general secretary of the NSW Labor Party when Milton Orkopoulos was elected as the state Labor MP for Swansea. Orkopoulos is now serving a minimum jail term of nine years for supplying drugs and having

sex with three teenagers, which shows you what a serious crime that is and how there are politicians who have engaged in disgraceful conduct too.

But what struck me most was the total disconnect between how the industry sees itself and how the broader public sees it.

There are now a large number of people who derive their income from managing players or reporting on

them, who need to stroke the players and administrators to get access. They form a cheer squad of spruikers and boosters. As in any subculture, they defend insiders and turn on those who break the taboo of the group. And it was taboo for me to suggest that football is not quite the civilising agent the industry believes it to be.

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can be quite intimidating to go against the group-think, especially if you know your competitor is playing to the powers of the industry. The female journalists were different but some of the male sports journalists were hysterical in condemning me.

Then came news that ex-player and now manager Ricky Nixon had been in a hotel room visiting the 17-year-old who first met players he managed

when they came to her school as part of a program on “community leadership”. Nixon maintained he went to help the troubled youngster – a community-minded response to a person in need. The girl claims they had sex and took drugs together. She has released footage to back her story.

Those touting the moral role of the AFL fell silent. Then, after nearly two weeks, the chief executive of the AFL, Andrew Demetriou, distanced

himself from Nixon. He was, he said, “disappointed”. Other words that come to mind are “appalled” or “disgusted”. But it was a significant signal. It signalled that Nixon could be dumped. He is on his own. There will be no more official protection for him. If they have finished with me, the Collingwood players can now tweet against him. It would be interesting to know whether they have done so.

A number of players who passed through the Nixon stable, including Ben Cousins, Wayne Carey and Gary Ablett snr developed drug problems. A young woman tragically died in Ablett’s hotel room while he was under the influence of drugs. What kind of a message was Nixon giving them about drug use? What kind of message is the AFL giving its managers? Is the policy of tolerance for first and second offences really helping the players? Is it a good example for young people generally?

A brave journalist could take up these issues but should not expect a polite reaction from the industry. The “everybody else” category would be interested in some real answers.

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