

## ***Australians are good sports by Tanja Kovac (544 words)***

*With the AFL Season commencing this week and the first Saturday match coinciding with Harmony Day, Tanja Kovac reflects on how our sporting heroes teach Australian children about the importance of fair play and good sportsmanship on and off the field.*

Sports-people are not perfect. In a world surrounded by the corrupting influences of competition, celebrity and cash, it requires great strength of character to refuse the lure of sex and drugs.

Of course other professions suffer from scandals - incidents of discrimination, sexual harassment and racial intolerance. We just don't hear about them.

So it is unfair for former Treasurer Peter Costello to single sports people out as poor role models for kids, as he did recently.

For every bad egg in Australian sport, there are a dozen good ones. For every minute of unsavoury Footy Show behaviour, there are five hours of life changing community projects being undertaken by sportspeople.

Aussies can spot the difference between sports stars and good sports. It's why we admire the heroic dignity of Bradman, Thorpe, Freeman and Rafter and why we shirk with horror at Lleyton, Jana and at the Chappell brothers' underarm bowling incident of 1981.

We have come to expect so much more than just athleticism from our heroes.

We demand that they are engage in fair play – both on and off the field. This means not just being healthy role models. It means commitment to human decency, playing by the rules and giving back to the community. Good sports encapsulate the best of

human values such as respect for the opponent, teamwork and fairness. These principles go to the core of who we are as Australians.

This is why sport and philanthropy in Australia now go hand in hand. You can't think breast cancer research without thinking The McGrath Foundation or troubled youth without thinking of Reach and Jim Stynes. Ian Thorpe's Fountain of Youth and the Cathy Freeman Foundation achieve more for indigenous youth through practical literacy and health programs than a hundred government initiatives.

And the AFL pours millions of dollars into the Ladder project to support homeless people, the Multicultural Development Program to support new arrivals to Australia and the Flying Boomerangs to support the professional development of indigenous youth. Mate, the AFL is even doing its bit to resolve the Middle East conflict by bringing young Palestinian and Israeli boys together in an Aussie Rules Peace Team.

During his years absorbed in the bottom line of the budget, Mr Costello seems to have missed the emerging role sport and sports stars are having in promoting development, peace and human rights. This is not surprising, as he was part of a double act that preferred to use sport to whip up nationalistic fervour, than celebrate it as a universal language bringing people together.

If only ex-politicians went into the business of philanthropy after their retirement from public life like sports stars do, instead of sitting back on the largesse of publicly funded superannuation, corporate speaking gigs and the odd paid opinion piece.

The commencement of the AFL season this week coincides with cultural diversity week and Harmony Day on the 21st March.

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