



Making a stand:

The Tu Yu Buffaloes link arms in a show of solidarity against domestic violence before kick-off at the 2016 Tiwi Islands Football League Grand Final between the Tu Yu Buffaloes and the Muluwurri Magpies at Wurrumiyanga, Bathurst Island.

TIWI ISLANDS

ISLAND SPECTACULAR

At the Tiwi Islands Grand Final, photojournalist Isabella Melody discovered an unforgettable community celebration »





“

It seems that football is a way of life for the Tiwi Islanders. Many of the supporters I spoke with were either ex-coaches, ex-players, supporters since they were babies, budding players, children or close relatives of the players; everyone has a semi-spiritual connection.” *Isabella Melody, photojournalist*





When I arrived at the oval, I saw that the spectators were mesmerised, looking on enraptured by the spectacle, as if it transcended a mere interest.” *Isabella Melody, photojournalist*





Festival of footy

Off the coast of Darwin, the Tiwi Islands Football League reaches a colourful crescendo at the Grand Final

WORDS **PETER BARRETT**

IT'S FOOTBALL, BUT not as you know it. Played lightning fast, end to end, with players too busy snapping goals to worry much about defence, this is Aussie Rules Tiwi Islands-style. And this month is the islands' biggest day on the calendar: the Wet Season Grand Final.

"The atmosphere is electric," says Dean Rioli, a former Essendon AFL footballer who grew up here supporting his Imalu Tigers, one of the island league's most successful clubs. "The women and the kids make all the noise, they're so passionate about their football. You see a lot of oval invasions and somersaults, and just pure excitement in celebration. It's high quality, skilful, fast and attacking football."

Australian Rules was first encouraged here by Catholic priest, Brother John Pye, who arrived on the twin islands, wedged between the Arafura and Timor Seas 80 kilometres north of Darwin, in 1941. Since those early games played on the local airstrip, footy has evolved into a passionate, identity-defining way of life for the islands' 2500 inhabitants.



The small island community has produced some exciting players, too. Think dual premierships Essendon All-Australian Michael Long; and the Rioli clan, including Dean, Richmond legend Maurice, Daniel (Richmond) and four-time premiership gun, Cyril Junior (Hawthorn).

"Twenty years ago, you'd play barefoot," says Dean. "It's basically wet season and sometimes torrential, monsoonal rains, and trying to kick the football barefooted once it was waterlogged – it was very slippery, so the skill of hitting their targets barefooted was amazing to watch."

Today, the players tend to wear flashy

fluorescent boots but the electric spirit of the game remains. "It's getting better and better, really, every year," says CEO of the Tiwi Land Council Brian Clancy, who has lived here for almost 30 years and played five seasons (as the "token whitefella") in a club now known as the Walama Bulldogs.

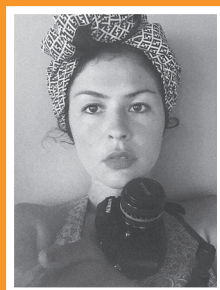
"It's like a cauldron of passion, everyone screaming for their team. We get the odd dog that runs across the oval but they just play around them. Footy's a pretty serious business but there's a lot of fun and laughter as well. And of course, for the winning team, winners are grinners, as always." 🐾

The Muluwurri Magpies raise the premiership cup. LEFT: Former Tuvalu Buffalo player Raymond Timaeapatun watches the match.



About the photographer

Isabella Melody is a Sydney-born photojournalist with an eye for untold stories. She wound up in Darwin as a staff photographer for the infamous *NT News* and became intrigued with territory life. Follow Isabella on Instagram @isabellamelody



Travel info

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