

CHAPTER 4

Sport was natural to us. It was a means of self-expression and satisfaction. At school we played Aussie Rules, Rugby Union and Rugby League football—the lot. Aboriginals are good at sport, every sport. The boys' home supplied all the best sportsmen in the district, and at the Le Fevre Boys' Technical School we used to win everything: races, the high-jump, the hop-step, anything. We bowled faster, hit harder than anybody. We were the best fighters, so nobody ever fought with us too often because they knew they would be beaten up. The only difficulties we had were academic, and there, nobody seemed willing to help us.

We Aboriginal boys were sitting on the fence at the hostel one day watching a soccer match. The State Intermediate Team (under 18) was practising. Someone said, 'Hey, look at that round ball that bloke's kickin' around. Gee, that's a funny lookin' ball.' We must have been about thirteen, fourteen or so at that time. I said, 'Oh, that's a basketball. They could get into trouble, them blokes, kickin' a basketball around like that.' Then another boy said, 'That's soccer! That's soccer them blokes are playin'!' And that was the first time I had heard of the game.

They said to us, 'Hey listen, you kids, why don't you form your own team and play against us? Give us some practice.' We said, 'Yeah, that's a good idea, we'll have a go. Just tell us the rules.'

'OK. Don't touch it with your hands, remember that. You can hit it with your head.' They gave us a bit of a practice, hitting the ball with our heads and so on. We thought, 'Gee, this is funny, hitting it with our head.' Then we said, 'Well, where do we stand?' The captain said, 'You stand on that side and us on this side.' So

we started off, and we beat them! They never got a kick. They were struggling away with their official uniforms on, with highly polished football boots. We were playing in bare feet. All the while we were saying, 'Is this how you play?' They would reply, 'Yeah, but take it easy a bit, will ya!' We beat them ten goals to nil! 'We're the State team,' they said. And we were kicking goals left, right and centre.

We said, 'We'll come and play next week, if you like.'

'Oh, no! Don't bother, thank you!' they said.

So we thrashed those blokes and they got the shock of their lives. They were all skilled players. They were playing for the State and had their set positions. They were attacking properly. But the Aboriginal boys were so lightning fast that by the time they got round to attacking us, we were gone. One of our boys, who played centre-forward that day, was in line for Olympic selection at fifteen, but he was denied a place in the South Australian State Athletic Squad because he was an Aboriginal. His name was Wally McArthur. We could not understand why he was denied this place.

And so, soccer got into my system. That year I played for the juniors in the Scottish Club (Port Thistle) in Adelaide. I got on well with the club crowd. They treated me like a human being. That was where I first felt free, when I began to play soccer. The team would talk roughly to me and I would know where I stood. Soccer was the only thing that enabled me to put up with my job. The Soccer Club became my home and I found a new security in my ability to play well. I found some friends in soccer. Most of all, I found a place where I could be somebody. I could play soccer better than most people and was improving all the time. I played one year junior, then senior at fifteen, and after that I played first division right through the rest of my professional soccer career.

I finished my apprenticeship in Adelaide when I was about twenty-one. By then I was one of the highest-paid soccer players in South Australia. I was playing in the best team in the State, Budapest. We won all the awards. One year I won the award for the best and fairest soccer player in the State. I was in the best team and I was one of the best players. I felt really good. Soccer was the only thing going for me that really mattered. My work did not matter at

all. It was an inconvenience to my soccer career. The worst days of the week were the days I had to go to work. It was like a horrible nightmare.

I used to receive eight pounds a week for playing with Budapest at this time, which was, I thought, big money. The club had many social functions. For the first time in my life I began to eat well. I went out, and mixed socially without too much embarrassment—a thing I could never do amongst Australians. These migrant clubs treated me better than white Australians did. They gave a person a feeling of dignity and self-respect.

I met my first girlfriend through football. She was a Scottish lass and we had many happy times together. Gradually, through her, my world began to expand. She introduced me to Russians, Dutch, Scots, Irish, Italians and Germans. They were all top-grade soccer players and we developed our own little circle of friends. We would go to Scotsman Jim McCabe senior's place and I was just one of the blokes. I learnt to relax as a part of this 'international set', proud that I was the only Australian in it. They accepted me for what I was and were never paternalistic or embarrassed by my presence. I felt free amongst these various national groups. We were friends. I had finished my apprenticeship and thought the best thing for me to do would be to go overseas and have a look around and meet people. This was in 1959. I wanted to educate myself, not so much as far as soccer was concerned, but in my understanding of other people.

Bob Orr was really the one who encouraged me to consider going overseas. He said it would give me a broad knowledge of world situations and that it would be of benefit to me when I came back to Australia.

An invitation came from a soccer team over there—Everton in Liverpool, which is a pretty rough area in Lancashire. They call the people who live there 'Scousers' (half-Irish and half-English). They consider themselves pretty tough characters and they have equally tough football teams.

I went over to England with many disadvantages. I travelled on an Italian liner, the cheapest possible class, and had no money to spend and few clothes to wear. In fact, I only had one white shirt

with one arm. Yes! One arm in it! I had to wear a coat in the steaming heat of the tropics and the Suez Canal. Even when I left Adelaide with all my luggage I had broken-down old boots and a few worn-out clothes. I had not saved much money before I left Adelaide.

When I boarded the Melbourne Express from Adelaide I was boiling hot. Men were even stripping off their shirts and singlets. I just sat there in my suit because I only had one arm in my shirt.

I was ill most of the way from Melbourne across the Great Australian Bight to Perth. The passengers were mostly new Australians and the ship stewards could not understand me. I tried to tell the stewards that I was sick. They did not understand, so I had to lie there for four days without food. Everybody thought I was just not hungry. I think I would have died if that part of the trip had gone on any longer, and I don't think anyone on the ship would have cared. The rest of the voyage wasn't much better.

We landed in Italy and I got off at Genoa and caught a train from there. Because of my money problem I got the worst possible seat in the train. I sat on my luggage because I was frightened somebody would steal it. I did not have any money to buy food so I starved all the way to Paris.

I arrived in Paris early one morning. There were a couple of Arabs on the train with me and I thought I could be friends with them, seeing I was an Aborigine and our skins were about the same colour. They said, 'We will help you carry your bags across the road.' They went ahead of me and that was the last I ever saw of my bags, and of course those Arabs. So much for trying to stop the theft of my luggage.

I tried to find my way to the station, the take-off point for Calais and then from Calais across the Channel to London. Bewildered, I crossed the road and walked to the central part of Paris to get on the underground railway. I was standing there trying to make head or tail of everything. I could not read anything at all because, of course, it was all in French. Suddenly, a Frenchman came along and asked me if I was in trouble. I said, 'Yes, I want to get to Gare du Nord Station.' He bought me a ticket. I was so depressed until that moment.

He was a tremendous bloke. He just came out of the blue for no reason at all and wanted to help me. I must have looked nice and lost. We got on a train and he paid the way to Gare du Nord. He told me all about the suburbs we were passing through and got me right to the station. Then he said, 'Right, are you OK?'

'Yes, thank you,' I said.

Off he went and I never saw him again. I thought it was very good of him. I may never meet him again but his kindness I will always remember. I had a shave. Then I bought a roll with some meat in it. I was down to my last few shillings!

I caught a train that afternoon for Calais and then went across the Channel to London. At Victoria Station in London I had four pennies in my pocket and one shirt with one arm.

I had previously sent a telegram to Bob Orr telling him I was coming and asking him to meet me at the London Railway Station. There are about fifteen stations in London, all as big as Sydney's Central Railway Station. Bob had to sort out which station. He was laughing when he found me, and said, 'You're a real bushy!'

I must have looked a real bushy too: my dirty, battered old haversack with my football boots hanging over the side, all that was left of my luggage. I had nothing else. I had not shaved since Paris. I did not impress people at all in London. Bob and the Everton football officials must have thought they had picked up a tramp or something worse.

They put me on a train to Liverpool where they booked me into some lodgings with some Irish people. They were poor lodgings and I was very very lonely, lonelier than I had ever been. I started training with the professional soccer team called Everton. I was at a complete disadvantage in every possible way. I was a stranger coming into a strange environment. Nobody knew me. I did not know them. I did not know what the set-up was. But I was keen and wanted to play good football. The standard was so high that it would have taken me at least six months to get fit. I had to do it in a matter of a couple of weeks. The officials and players did not give me any help.

They played really dirty all along the line. In addition, the players were very jealous and small-minded. If I made good I

would have taken one of their friends' places in the team and they did not want that. That was behind the ill-feeling and it took me some time to understand it all.

They were so good at playing football that they could kick the ball to within a foot of where they wanted it to go. The players would put it two yards in front of me so that I could not get at it, or they would kick it behind me. They made me look stupid. I was going to flatten one or two of those blokes. I was pretty wild with them because they were really giving me the runaround.

I remember when I was playing one particular game I was just new and the grounds were wet and heavy, whereas we played on hard grounds in Australia. It really takes the strength out of your legs very quickly, plodding through heavy mud six inches thick and trying to kick a heavy ball. My legs tired on me and I got the cramps. I could not move. I struggled off the field and told the trainer, who said, 'Get out back there in that field and keep playing!' I was going to punch him in the head but I had had fights with a few other players and, as far as I was concerned, that was it. I left them. I got a transfer. They did not want me as a friend or as a member of their team.

Also, I was desperately lonely there. I used to walk the streets of Liverpool at night and wish I was back in Australia. I thought they were unfair. I felt so badly towards them that when they toured Australia years later I would not watch them at all, not even on the television. I would not read about them in the papers either. I was so completely disgusted with them. Even when I went back to England in 1967 I would not go near the club or go to the football field where they played. As far as I am concerned they did not exist and I suppose as far as they are concerned I do not either. I doubt if they would even remember me. That is fair enough with me. I hated them for being like that and for taking advantage of me in that situation.

I found a job in the shipyards at Cammel Lairds on the Mersey River in Liverpool. The Scousers are pretty tough. I suppose you have to be one of them to get on with them. There were ten thousand blokes on the shipyard and as far as I know I was the only Australian. They gave me a pretty rugged time.

Some of them knew I was an Aborigine and I was coloured to them. 'The coloured bloke from Australia,' they would call me. 'What are you? A nigger or what?'

I said, 'I'm an Aborigine.'

They asked, 'What the heck is that?'

At the beginning, I would explain to some who were genuinely interested, but I finished up not explaining to anybody.

They were the same with the West Indians who worked in the shipyard. They were good to their faces but behind their backs they would be vicious and cruel. Some of the Scouses did not cotton on to who I was at first and they used to carry on with me against these West Indians. There was one West Indian union man who was their representative. They elected him as their union representative, yet they hated him. I asked them why they elected him when they hated him so much. They said, 'Well, if the nigger wants to put himself up for election, we could not go against him. It would look bad for the union, you know.'

I said they were being two-faced and if they did not want him, then why not tell him and let him know where he stood?

Anyhow, this West Indian finished up taking me along and I enrolled in the union. I was going to tell him about the attitude of the men but I thought I had better not. He would probably find out himself anyhow. I told those white English blokes, 'I think you are doing the wrong thing. I'm an Aborigine and I don't like your attitude towards me or towards the West Indian fella.'

Of course, they disliked me from then on. I was history as far as they were concerned. We were working on a large oil tanker called *British Justice*. I thought the name was ironical. I was a fitter trying to install big engines in the inside of the ship. There were dozens of fitters all round the place doing this sort of work. Our leading hand was Jewish and they disliked him too. Funny blokes. They hated everybody but themselves. They probably hated themselves too. They were peculiar people with a twisted way of looking at things.

Anyway, because I would never give in to them, they took their revenge. They would be working about thirty or forty feet above me, welding. They would drop the red-hot weld rod in my area.

Obviously the attitude was, 'There's the black bastard down there, we'll drop it on him.'

I would yell out, 'Hey, you blokes, what you doin'? I'm down here!' They would say, 'If you don't like it you f—er, well move over!'

I could not move over because I was stuck in between steel plates in the narrow passageways of the engine room we were building.

When they were leaving after work, they would just push past and knock me, and keep walking. Real tough guys they thought they were. I could not fight ten thousand blokes. I am not capable of really fighting anybody, but I certainly could not handle those blokes. I was glad to leave and they were probably glad to see the last of me. I found one or two blokes who were reasonably friendly but the rest of them were so bad that these nice blokes did not have the guts to be obviously friendly with me.

When I decided to break from the football club at Everton and leave Liverpool altogether I bumped into a bloke by the name of Gordon Tilley who said, 'If you want to come to Wigan, why don't you come and stay at my mother's place? I'll be going away on National Service, so ask if you can stay with her and my father.' Wigan is a little town near Liverpool.

I went around to see them. Mr Tilley was a miner and Mrs Tilley was a housewife. I finished up boarding with them. They treated me like a son and they were great people. My life began to change for the better. I was really happy with them. I found a new job down a coal mine near Manchester. I stayed with the Tilleys for most of the time I was in England. I became more intent on enjoying myself socially and meeting people.

Our team was in the Lancashire competition which was pretty tough. The training helped me. The rugged, tough, quick, keen type of football gave me polish. The hardness and decisiveness in the play that I had to have, improved my game considerably. This is what I got from the game and I did not realize it but it was happening to me.

At the same time I was working in the Moseley Colliery. It was one of the biggest pits in that area of England.

For a short time I moved to a little village near Wigan called

Leigh. I lived with another Aborigine called Wally McArthur and his wife Marlene. I had a room on the top floor. Wally was one of the greats of Rugby League in Britain at that time. He was a wizard on the wing. He was an idol of the crowds. I was lying in bed one morning and I heard, *clop—clop—clop*.

'Strike, that's a horse coming down the street. I can't hear his other feet moving though. He must be moving in time and bringing his hooves down together. It's definitely a horse. Nobody can make that noise!' I thought.

I stuck my head out of the window and could not see anything except a dirty-faced miner walking down the street, coming home from work. I waited for him to come level with me. I thought, 'He's got something funny on his feet!' I could not make it out, so I rushed downstairs and watched him go past. The miner was wearing clogs. I had a good laugh with Wally over this.

I used to go to work with all the miners. Soon I was wearing heavy wooden clogs too. They are very good to wear. If a miner's foot is caught between the rails in the mines the foot slips out of the clog easily. They stop the cold getting on to your feet when you walk through snow too. Also, if anything heavy falls on the foot it is not crushed as the wood acts as a support. Clogs have saved many a miner's life. I wondered how they would go in Alice Springs or Sydney.

I went back and lived again with the Tilley family.

The miners were a rough lot and they spoke with a particular dialect. The Lancashire miners who live around Wigan and Leigh and all these places outside of Liverpool have a broad, old-fashioned dialect that is really nice. Within six months I was speaking with their accent myself! I sat up one day and thought, 'Strike, I'm talking like one of the blokes!' I became fluent in their way of speaking.

Even Sandy, the Tilley dog, was looking at me side-on. He must have seen a transformation. I used to take him for a walk every night and would ask, 'Doest the dog want a walk?' If the dog could have talked he probably would have said, 'Yes, the dog does want a walk, ya bush-wackin' kangaroo!'

Most of the time I worked up the top at the mine but

occasionally I would get in the cage to go down. It descended like a rocket. I was terrified the first time I was in it. We went hurtling down through pitch black. We would reach the bottom—bump—and out we would get and all the miners would switch their lights on. Then they hopped into trains to go further underground into the mine. It would take you, it seemed, years to get back if you got lost on your own. Sometimes the tunnels were so low you would have to lie back in the train. Other tunnels would be three times as big as a room.

I made good friends there also. For the first time in my life I made good friends at my work.

There was a miner at Moseley named Terry O'Grady who played for England and I made friends with him. Then Frank Griffin, another Rugby League star, became a close friend. They were both my mates at work. They were both about six foot two high and seventeen stone. They did some shocking things to me, but in a friendly way. The viciousness of the shipyard was gone.

Terry and I would sometimes go down into the pits when nobody was there. We would find a corner in the pit, right down below, switch our lights off and go to sleep. Blokes would be walking by: 'Come on, Perkins and O'Grady, get up from there!'

O'Grady would say, 'If you don't get going, I will thump thee!'

'Yeah,' I would add, 'and I'll thump thee, too!' I was part of the mob and enjoyed it. We would thump them, too, up top. O'Grady could not care less about anybody. If anyone said anything to him he would knock them. He was my mate, as were all the others. They were great for all sorts of jokes.

I was in the cage one day, ready to go down the pit. The men with me said, 'You hop in first.' They opened the cage door. It was a Saturday afternoon when not too many people were working. We thought we would do a bit of overtime. I walked into the cage. Then they all stood round the cage and piddled on me. They just stood over the top until I was sopping wet. They got about ten or twelve other blokes to help them. I could not get out. I was absolutely dripping!

'How do you like that, you kangaroo bludger?' they called down. We were all laughing. I had to get changed and have a shower. I

stunk for about a week. I had to put deodorants, perfumes, soaps on myself. Mrs Tilley would not even let me in the door. She smelt me coming down the street. The dog would not let me take him for a walk. He thought I was putrid. Worst of all, I could not go to the dances for about a week and a half. Everyone copped it sooner or later. Of course, it all got round to my friends in Wigan and they all thought it was a huge joke. There was no malice.

We would have snow-fights when the snow came down. I would start snow-fighting with one and then they would all get into strategic positions and I would cop the lot. For an Australian who had never seen snow, it was a new experience. I often felt, perhaps wrongly, that this was probably where I got my kidney trouble from, that was to cause so much difficulty in years to come. I was really happy there. It was rough but I liked it because they were good people.

I was at football training at Wigan one day and the goalkeeper for the England Amateur Team, Harry Sharret, came up to me and said, 'Do you want to play for Bishop Auckland?' That was the top amateur team in the world. At that time many of those blokes who were playing for Bishop Auckland played for the England Amateur side. It was top grade soccer in many ways. Some played on various occasions for first division teams.

I went over and had a trial with them and they put me in as left-half. That is where I stayed for the rest of my life in soccer in England. I replaced the left-half who never got back into the team again. His name was Mike Greenwood. This was the number one amateur team in the world. It was amateur but we were getting paid almost as much as the professionals. Top professionals were on about twenty-five pounds. I got on well with the boys in the Bishop Auckland team.

The Geordies, on the Scottish border near Newcastle, like the Wigan people, are tremendous soccer fans, entirely different to types of people I found in Liverpool. They were friendly, genuine people. They liked me and I would play my heart out for them. They treated me like a human being and looked after me.

When I went to the dances people would come up and talk to me, and the difference between Australian girls and English girls

became so marked. The comparison is just like chalk and cheese. Australian girls have a blown-up sense of their own importance. They are often cold and do not know how to act. They seem to have a fearful attitude towards sex and friendship. But with English girls things are more natural. They are easy-going and you can dance and enjoy yourself with them. They know how to be friends. They don't go on ego trips over themselves.

For the first time I really relaxed at a dance. Nobody bothered me like in an Australian dancehall. It was the first time in my life that I had ever felt free of white prejudice at a dance. That is why I always will appreciate those people in England. English people are great as far as I am concerned. They are good people generally. I had never felt free before in such surroundings. I had always felt sorry for myself or had a complex about myself or lacked confidence or looked upon myself in a certain distasteful way when I went into a dancehall. In England and in this kind of company I became a human being and free.

The day came when we played against Oxford University. When I was playing against Oxford I thought how odd it was that I, an Aborigine, was playing soccer against all these university characters. We beat them one-nil. They were a very good team. That day it started going through my mind that I would like to go to university one day. There on that Oxford soccer field I began to think, 'Geez, it's lovely around here. These blokes here are going to university. I wonder if I could go to university?'

I had thought about it before but on that particular day it came home to me with force because of these surroundings, the atmosphere and the people I met there. One's life turns about unexpected events. At that stage it was the quality of life at university that appealed to me rather than any educational motivation.

The best game that I have ever played was a match against Crooktown. I was at the peak of my form. A couple of top grade professional clubs made me offers to go and play with them. But I was happy at Bishops. The people were good and the officials were kind. They looked after me.

For that game against Crooktown I was playing opposite

Seamus O'Connell (an Irishman of course). He played regularly for top grade first division clubs. Anyhow, we beat Crooktown and O'Connell, one of the best players in England, never got a kick—I put him out of the ground most of the time. I was getting hard and tough.

I was working, playing and living with great enthusiasm. I had about twenty girlfriends in Wigan so naturally I was broke most of the time. But I enjoyed myself.

Out of the blue I received a letter from Australia. A friend of mine, John Ferguson, had been in contact with a soccer club in South Australia. They wanted to bring me back to play for them. I said, 'If you pay my fare back, I'll come.'

They agreed, much to my surprise, and then I had to decide whether to accept or not. It was a real dilemma to me. Whichever way I went I would lose. I was so happy in England, but deep down I knew I could not stay away from Australia. I thought, 'I've had a good time here. I've seen lots of things, met a lot of people and found a lot of happiness.' The English people in Wigan and Bishop Auckland or England generally, I suppose, are wonderful. They are decent people and give you a fair go. They treated me better than I was ever treated in Australia.

I thought about Aboriginal affairs and what my contribution might be. I thought, 'I must go to university. I've got to prepare myself educationally. Perhaps an opening will come in Australia.'

My thinking was very simplistic at that time. I decided to return to Australia and when I told everybody they thought I was joking. When I left England my good friends all cried. They were saying goodbye and singing songs and crying, all at the same time, so I joined in and cried.

Just before this I had been at Bishop Auckland and the same thing occurred there when I played my last match. At Wigan I got on the train and left for London. It was early 1960 and I was on my way back to my country, my people and problems.