

CHAPTER 7

Bankstown Soccer Club in Sydney needed players but they thought anybody outside of New South Wales was no good. When Eileen and I arrived they accommodated us in an old house out at Greenacre. 'This is no good,' I said. 'I'm not going to stand this.'

I trained with them for a week and they said they did not think I would make the team. They gave me a real runaround.

Australians could learn a bit from the British and others about managing sporting teams in general. They tend to be dogmatic and do little in the way of offering incentive or trying to accommodate change or the temperament of players.

Their typical statement is usually, 'Every man who plays in this team must be paid the same!' You cannot do that in football. Some people play better than others and you should pay them accordingly.

I decided I was not going to put up with this and we would leave for Darwin. I went up to Kings Cross for some reason or other. I was walking back to my car when, in the middle of crowded Darlinghurst Road, I bumped into an old friend of mine named Alex Suchanek, the coach of Pan Hellenic Soccer Team in Sydney.

I was all ready to get in the car and drive back to Eileen waiting at Greenacre and say, 'Look we're off tomorrow. This is it. We're finished here,' when I bumped into Suchanek in the Cross.

Pan Hellenic was one of the best soccer teams in Sydney. It was sponsored by the Greek community and was very rich. Suchanek was from Adelaide and he said, 'What are you doing here?'

'Oh, I'm just passing through, more or less.'

He said, 'Are you playing for anyone?'

'No,' I said.

'Well, why don't you come out and run with Pan Hellenic?'

He knew I was one of the best soccer players in South Australia. I had won the Best and Fairest medal, the most coveted soccer award in the State. This did not cut any ice with the Bankstown crowd but Suchanek knew what I could do.

'I'll give you a try and you'll be in the team,' he said.

That invitation changed my life. I trained with Pan Hellenic. We had a game the following Sunday against Prague, the top club in New South Wales at the time. They had seven Austrian Internationals in the team. Everybody in the Prague team was in international class. Pan Hellenic gave me a run in the second half.

The first ball that came down to me I sent away, *bang*, for a goal. It went right past the famous Australian goalkeeper Ronnie Lord. He was still waiting for me to kick it when it was in the net. The next one then came along, went past the centre-half and I put that in the net as well. I scored three goals. Pan Hellenic went hysterical!

They had never beaten Prague before in trial games or anything else. Of course they were all knocking me over to sign me on. I signed for the club through Mr Zantey, then the team manager. In three months I was captain of their team and in six months I was their coach as well.

With my new status and the financial rewards it brought, I was now in a position to pursue my immediate objective of a university career, and beyond that, I hoped, a revolution in race relations in Australia.

I had become interested in Aboriginal affairs when I was about fifteen. My confusion about my tribal people, Alice Springs and the treatment we received when blokes would stone us down the street, calling out, 'Let's get the niggers,' were the beginnings of my anxiety for justice.

I remember the time we were chased after the pictures and the kids were yelling, 'Stone the niggers!' I was bewildered.

That was a small beginning of my journey, I suppose, in standing my ground on Aboriginal rights. Another was when one

of the boys at the home, Ken Hampton, wanted to join the Navy and was not accepted. We asked 'Why not?' Then it came out in the front page of the news in Adelaide. Aborigines just were not allowed in the Service. That really hit me hard.

I thought, 'Gee, Ken wants to go into the Service as a cadet and they won't let him just because he is an Aborigine, one of us!'

I could not get over this then and I never have. It still sticks in my brain. That started me thinking and I became involved in a struggle, first of all to understand the situation, and subsequently to right it.

My desire for reform came to a point on meeting with Don Dunstan in Adelaide. We organized a petition of Aboriginal rights.

He said, 'You hold a meeting and I'll come down and address it.'

Today, he is the Premier of that State. At the time he was not yet even a very outspoken Opposition member of Parliament. This was just when he was an ordinary QC and MP.

So I called a meeting in the hall with some Aborigines and white friends. Eileen came along too. Don Dunstan attended and spoke on Aboriginal affairs. Much of it went over my head because I just could not put things into place. I thought the general idea was to talk about Aboriginal rights, and we set up a petition. But I found it difficult, in my ignorance, to get to the heart of the matter of racial prejudice in Australia.

As I said, Mr Dunstan was a member of Parliament at that time. He came to the meeting in white tie and tails. He was afterwards to attend a ball at the Norwood Town Hall. I thought he looked like a penguin and the Aborigines were laughing at him a bit. But we thought he was a nice bloke because he came and spoke simply and with dignity to us. That was a big step, an organizational step for me. I had never attended a proper meeting, let alone organize one, before that night. After that I would get up and speak in Adelaide at public meetings. But every time I did so I became confused in my thinking. I would be laughed at or the audience would ridicule me because everything I said was not in the correct perspective. I hated my confusion and I hated being laughed at. I wanted to speak but though I could think quite well could not get the message across.

The first time I spoke publicly on Aboriginal affairs was at a

dinner which Mr Dunstan attended. After that I went on a radio talk show and there were little press articles here and there about my opinions. Then there were arguments between myself and other individuals. Some of the groups in Adelaide asked me to talk to them. It was a small beginning.

When I came to Sydney my deep interest in sport was transferred more to Aboriginal affairs. I realized that Sydney was the centre of the mass media and this was where I could get an opinion across to people in Australia.

I do not think it was anything specific that sparked off my activity; rather, it gathered momentum over the years and more or less reached its climax in my first year in Sydney. I was sought out by the Rev. Ted Noffs of the Wayside Chapel, who encouraged and assisted me. He was the one who really lifted my thinking on to a higher level and made my involvement more meaningful. That was the turning point into a more active field. It was a critical time in my life, meeting Ted.

I remember an address at the Lyceum Theatre when the Rev. Noffs invited me to speak. That was the first occasion on which I was really frightened, because of having to face a big audience. There were people there who were very sympathetic, but that did not take the horror out of the situation. I did not really know how to speak and I was nervous. But the press reported my speech and I began to become known in the eastern States. I gained confidence in myself and Ted helped me do this.

Meanwhile, my soccer career was proceeding very successfully. The first game when I kicked such an enormous number of goals provided my entry into big-time soccer in Sydney. I saw that this was the means whereby I could earn enough to study full time, doing the matriculation course in order to go to Sydney University. There was quite a large amount of money involved in soccer, and especially when I kicked a goal. Every time I kicked a goal I earned ten pounds (or more) from various supporters. They would just leave it in my shoe, or sock, or put it in my coat pocket.

The Greeks seem to own everything around Sydney so I did not buy a meal for nearly two years. They seemed to own most of the restaurants and cafes. I could get everything I wanted and they

refused to let me pay. However, it was only after a win that we had dinner out. For the rest it was all study and living quite poorly for me and Eileen.

I went to Pan Hellenic dances and learnt all the Greek dances. In fact, at times I was leader in the dance. They even thought I was Greek. Some people used to yell out at me on the field in Greek but they did not understand why I had such an English name. They thought I might have changed it. Eighty or ninety percent of the Greeks accepted me as Greek. They loved their soccer and treated all the players very well.

There were some very good players in the team. I was the only Australian and I was captain. Everybody else spoke Greek or Yugoslav or Hebrew, or something else. I was the one they all used to turn to, often because I was the one who could speak English the best, especially to the referee. Greeks are very fiery and I needed all my wits about me to keep control of the team. I had a marvellous time with those people. The Greeks are very good people and I always have a lot of time for them, not only because they treated me well but because they treated me as a human being and I was comfortable in their presence. In fact they were almost overkind.

I used to look at photographs of myself leading the Greek dances with my wife, who of course danced as well. I always felt sorry that I could not join and become a member of the Pan Hellenic Club but it was for Greeks only. I thought this was a bit peculiar but I suppose it is their club. I did not mind really. There was nothing against me racially, it was just that I was not a Greek.

They helped me more than anybody (financially that is) to get started in Sydney, by giving me money to play and giving me a reasonable signing-on fee at various times. In fact, it was the last signing-on fee that allowed me to buy a home unit. This brought me a security I had never known before.

Football served a three-fold purpose. The first was to provide me with finance for my study. Second, it enabled me to keep fit because I needed to study for such long hours. Third, it was a means whereby I could mix socially and enjoy myself comfortably.

However, the end objective of it all was the university degree. That was my main reason for playing soccer at a high level

consistently and being so determined to do it, so I could get my degree and speak and work on Aboriginal affairs. Those four years in Sydney were devoted to educating myself to operate in Aboriginal affairs effectively. There was no other reason for this.

They were very tough years. Everything I did in the university course was just like pouring water on to a dry sponge, as far as learning was concerned. The more I learnt, the more my interest developed, and everything I learnt I sort of hung on the Aboriginal peg.

I would think to myself: 'I have to learn this because that will be necessary in Aboriginal affairs. I have to do sociology to give me a broad outlook, and psychology, and political science in case I get involved in government and so on.'

That is the thing that forced me to succeed. I do not think there was anything else. Except perhaps a little bit of hatred which is a good ingredient if you can control it. A little bit of hatred of the system was there all the time. I hated the system of the white people: 'They are not going to grind me in the dirt,' I thought.

This was one of the things that kept me going. It was part of the overall force and I could not deny that it was an element in my study. The more the whites criticized Aborigines, the more I was determined to learn, and so fight them and answer their irrational criticism.

The matriculation course prior to university was one of the most humiliating and humbling experiences of my life. I started off at the age of twenty-five in a classroom of forty-three young kids. I had not realized what I was letting myself in for. I probably would never have done it if I had been aware of what was going to happen.

I paid the fees out of Eileen's wages and my football earnings. There were no government or other scholarships at that time. I got the shock of my life when I walked into the class. I had thought there were going to be older people. I was the oldest. Next to me was a seventeen-year-old lad. I nearly collapsed. The youngest in the class were fifteen-year-olds. For half of the term they were throwing paper darts around the place. Most of them were playing up. Their parents were fairly wealthy and many had failed at

various schools around Sydney. They could not care less about an education. They had plenty of time—I didn't.

I had to take my book for marking to the teacher, right in front of the class, and often she would yell at me. She would throw the book back at me and tell me to go and do it properly next time. It was very humbling in front of the younger people. The teacher was younger than I was.

I considered all this humiliation as part of my training: 'This is what I have to go through to build up my determination to enable me to get through.'

I would get up at six in the morning and study for a couple of hours before I went to the school. Then, during the lunch hour I would study again. As soon as I came home I would have tea and a half-hour break and then study right through until about eleven o'clock. This went on during the holidays and all. I just about forgot my wife's name. We didn't meet too often in those years. She used to spend her evenings reading in bed. I would be worn out trying to do my best at school and playing football as well.

We also had my young nephew Neville Perkins living with us at this time. He wanted to get a good education and was determined to do so even at his age. He was and has proved to be good material.

Football and study complemented each other in many ways. One kept me very fit and the other gave me a break from doing the same thing. One was excessively physical and the other was excessively mental.

When Ted Noffs sent me a telegram in Alice Springs after the matriculation results came out, to tell me I had passed, I was overwhelmed! It must have been a pretty narrow squeeze though. But I was through!

Then I went to Sydney University. I had picked out the course deliberately. In the first year I did psychology, anthropology and political science right through. I studied psychology in the first year and sociology in the second and third years. In the second year I received a credit grade for sociology, which was astounding—for me anyway.

I was not brilliant academically but I was a real slugger. I worked hard all the time. I never really wasted an hour in my study

schedule throughout the whole year. It was planned and programmed. Every day of my holidays was planned to the hour. I knew exactly what I was going to do and I stuck to it. I never deviated from it at all. My wife was an inspiration. She sacrificed a lot for my studies. We were a good team.

It was very good for myself inwardly to be put to the test and to succeed under those conditions. It was necessary for me because my life previously had been fairly undisciplined, certainly in the academic field and in other ways too.

I felt quite ashamed of my first term at university. I was hardly educated at all, while most of those young people at the university were very well educated. I did not even know what a noun or a verb was. Many of the words the lecturer was using went straight over my head. I did not understand him at all and for the first term I sat with a dictionary beside me, wondering what was meant. Then I gradually began to cotton on and make the appropriate notes and know what the hell he was talking about.

My wife worked. I did not have much money and we had to struggle, especially when the football season was over. During one of the vacations I cleaned City of Sydney Council toilets. I always think it is good to keep one's ego down a little or else you start thinking you are some kind of superior being. I thought this would be a good exercise. They became the cleanest toilets in Australia! I made them sparkle! Many a time the council workers came in and thought they had gone in the wrong door and went out again. I polished everything, right up to the ceiling. I scrubbed the walls, the tiles, the floors. Everything was glistening. Of course when I told them I was going to leave they wanted to keep me on as a toilet cleaner.

I took similar employment at Mick Simmons, stacking boxes down the back of their store in George Street and sweeping the floors and throwing rubbish out and so on. I thought that was good experience too.

Going on to become the first Aborigine in the whole of Australia to become a university graduate was an anti-climax. I was quite emotional because of my achievement on behalf of my people, but found myself saying, 'Right, now the fight's on. Now the hard

work really begins. Now you've got to pit yourself against these other people who are very well educated, have a great deal of experience, and certainly in many cases are a lot smarter than you are.'

In Sydney University's Great Hall on Graduation Day, I got the biggest applause in the whole hall. The poor bloke before me and the couple of people after me hardly even heard their names. One bloke, whose name was Perrin or something like that, said, 'The worst thing I ever did was to have a name after yours. Nobody even heard me. My mother and father did not hear my name called out at all!' We had a laugh about that. They gave me a tremendous cheer in the hall and I did not expect it. I was very pleased.

My mother was there in the Great Hall. She had just come down from Alice Springs and of course she has never been out of Alice in her life. She is a real bushy. She was immensely impressed by the Great Hall of Sydney University and all the people in their university gowns with bright colours.

The Cardinal sat up there in his scarlet robes and all the other people were looking very dignified. My mother was quite overwhelmed by the visual effect of it all. She is never usually overwhelmed by meeting anyone important. She thinks nobody is more important than anyone else. She is very humble and dignified as a lot of old Aboriginal people are. It is the sort of thing you cannot take away from them. It does not matter where they live or what situation they are in. Mum would be just as pleased to meet the sweeper in the streets and have a good conversation with him as she would be to meet the Queen of England.

Nevertheless, in her own way she was very happy to be there on such a spectacular occasion and she was happy that I had passed through the university, whatever that was, and received my degree, whatever that was too.

Eileen's mother and father were there as well and some of our other friends and relatives. It was a great occasion. Such Aboriginals as John Moriarty, Gordon Briscoe and Neville Perkins were there. John and Neville both now have their degrees.

But it foreshadowed a lot of things.