

CASE STUDY: YARNING CIRCLE SESSIONS

STRENGTHENING SUPPORT FOR FIRST NATIONS PLAYERS IN WA FOOTBALL

Overview

Creating culturally safe environments is a priority across the WAFL and WAFLW pathways, particularly for First Nations players balancing elite sport with cultural identity, community connection, and leadership responsibilities.

To respond to this need, the Yarning Circle Sessions were developed as a culturally grounded player support initiative within club environments.

The Need

First Nations players often navigate multiple responsibilities beyond football, including cultural obligations, community leadership, and maintaining strong family and cultural connections. Traditional club support structures do not always provide culturally safe spaces for these experiences to be openly shared.

There was a clear need for an approach that:

- Embedded cultural safety into everyday club settings
- Enabled genuine two-way dialogue
- Supported wellbeing through culturally informed practice
- Strengthened connection between players and clubs

The Approach

The Yarning Circle Sessions provide a dedicated space for First Nations players to connect, reflect, and engage in facilitated conversations around culture, wellbeing, identity, and leadership.

Delivered on-site and scheduled prior to training, the sessions are designed to be accessible and integrated into existing club routines.

Each session includes:

- An informal meet-and-greet to build comfort and trust
- A facilitated yarning circle conversation
- A guided reflection document completed in the first session, capturing players' perspectives, aspirations, and challenges.

These insights are then shared with clubs to inform more responsive and culturally appropriate support strategies. Where themes emerge, follow-up engagement ensures feedback leads to meaningful action.



Credit: Jess Gibbs

Early Impact in Club Settings

During an early rollout at a WAFL club, players identified a need for stronger cultural connection within the team environment and more opportunities to share lived experiences.

In response, the club worked collaboratively with facilitators to:

- Create ongoing spaces for cultural dialogue
- Strengthen understanding of First Nations perspectives within the group
- Embed more consistent culturally safe practices in team culture

Players reported noticeable shifts in connection and confidence, with one sharing:

“It gave us a space to actually talk and be heard.”

Leadership and Delivery

The program is led by Jade Narkle, First Nations Programs Specialist at WA Football, alongside her father, Phil Narkle—an Aboriginal Elder and former WAFL and AFL player.

As an Elder Consultant, Phil brings cultural knowledge, lived experience, and deep community connection, strengthening the authenticity and impact of each session.

Outcomes

For clubs, the program supports:

1. Deeper understanding of First Nations players’ experiences
2. More proactive and culturally informed wellbeing strategies
3. Stronger inclusion and team cohesion

For players, outcomes include:

1. Increased cultural connection within the club environment
2. Greater confidence to express lived experiences
3. Enhanced sense of belonging and leadership development
4. Stronger voice in shaping club culture

Conclusion

As WA Football continues to prioritise inclusion and belonging, the Yarning Circle Sessions demonstrate how culturally informed, player-centered initiatives can create meaningful and lasting impact.

By embedding safe cultural dialogue into everyday club environments, the program strengthens both individual wellbeing and the broader culture of the game—supporting First Nations players to thrive as athletes, leaders, and community members.