

THE INTERVIEW



with Ann Wason Moore

Footy stars tackle gap facing our Indigenous

Pathways project gives young the chance to build a brighter future

It's all about the gaps. During his decade as a Melbourne Demon and then West Coast Eagle, AFL midfielder Andy Lovell looked for any opportunity to find space and open the field, before transferring those skills to a 21-year coaching career at St Kilda, Geelong, West Coast and the Gold Coast Suns.

And it was the same game plan for former Gold Coast Titans assistant coach and Tugun Seahawks super-coach Selwyn Apanui, even if the sport was rugby league rather than Aussie Rules.

But now the two Indigenous footballers have teamed up to close the gaps for their mob.

The pair are pouring their experience and passion into creating Murra Pathways, a grassroots program designed to work directly with students, schools and employers to help Indigenous youth transition from education into training and meaningful employment.

Lovell, the AFL's first Indigenous coach and AFL Tasmania Hall of Famer, said both he and Apanui were inspired as parents to improve the future for their children's own cohort.

In 2021, 58 per cent of First Nations youth were fully engaged in employment, education or training compared with 80 per cent of non-Indigenous youth.

However, Lovell said those statistics did not reflect a lack of ability or motivation, but a lack of access and opportunity – with the students facing barriers that most

employers would not know how to consider.

"Some of these kids want to apply for a job, but they don't have a laptop at home. So how do they even get on to the platform to submit their expression of interest?" Lovell said.

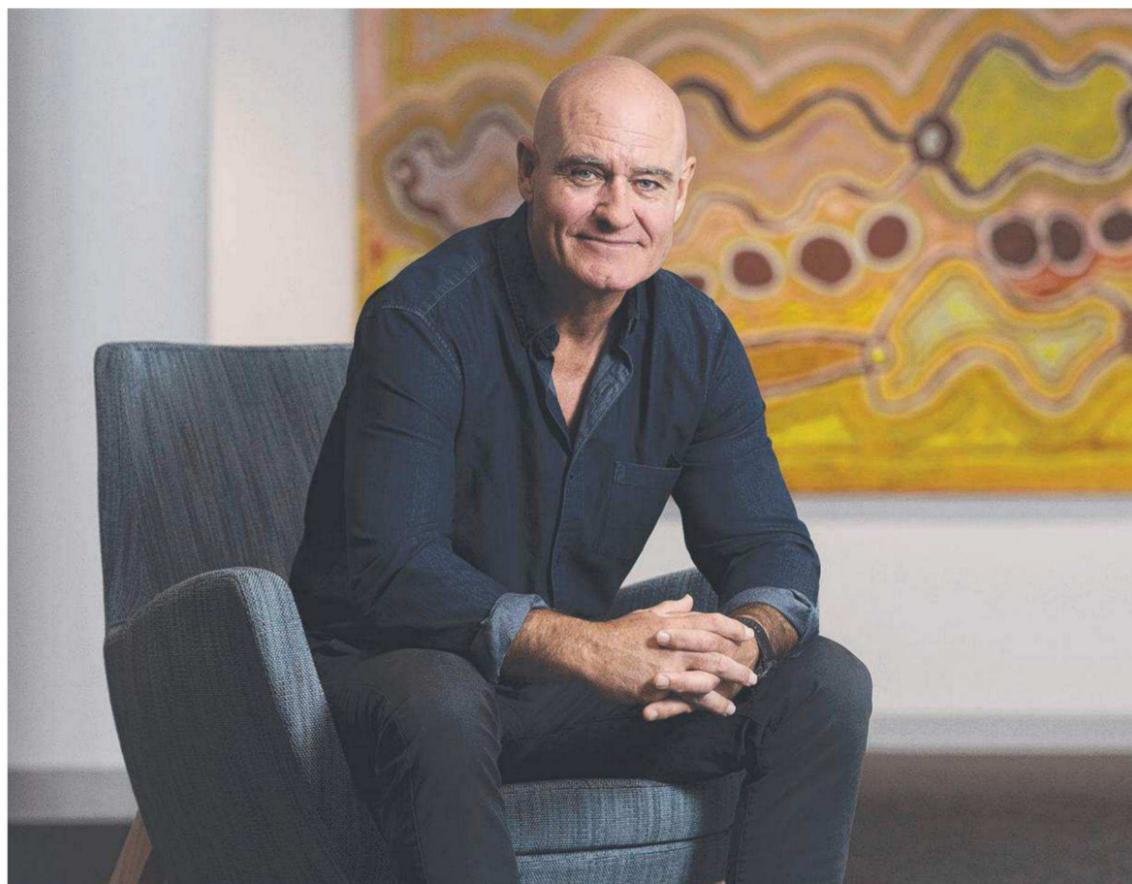
"Or they might not have someone who can help them navigate their way through a multi-layered on-boarding process, like opening a bank account or applying for a Tax File Number, and that's where employers can help the students face-to-face ... and that's when they can see where these gaps are."

Through Murra Pathways, Apanui said they were able to connect school-based Indigenous students with major corporate partners such as Qantas, Woolworths and Griffith University. They already had helped more than 200 Indigenous students, with that number set to more than double over the next 12 months.

Apanui, a proud Bundjalung man who is also the director of the Indigenous-owned apparel company AKL Industries, said more than 60 were now employed, with amazing results from the very first day.

"The very first session we did was at Palm Beach Currumbin State High, with Indigenous girls," said Apanui, whose mother was the first Aboriginal teacher aide at PBC.

"At first the girls were not into it that day, but by the end dozens had joined in and they did not want to leave. The employers were really getting to know them, handing out lollies, making it fun and you could



Andy Lovell has teamed up with Selwyn Apanui (below) to create Murra Pathways, a grassroots program designed to work directly with students, schools and employers to help Indigenous youth transition from education into training and meaningful employment.

see the barriers drop. By the end of that session, three of the girls had jobs.

"We started with girls because they have kind of been forgotten about. There has been a necessary focus on boys because they were struggling, but so many programs leave the girls out; we wanted to count them in from the start.

"It's the same reason we started right here on the Gold Coast. As well as being where we are both based, Indigenous kids here don't get the same attention that a lot of other regional areas do. It's almost an invisible cohort, but at PBC alone there are more than 200 Indigenous students, and I don't think we pay enough attention to how generational trauma still affects them."

Growing up in Tasmania, Lovell said he always knew he was Indigenous, but only discovered details about his ancestors after his grandmother died.

He said his family was devastated to find out what happened to his great-great-grandmother when she was just a child herself, and it served as another inspiration to help Indigenous kids today.

"We found out that in 1893 when my great-great-grandmother was just 13, she was put on a boat in Brisbane and sent to a foster-care family down in Hobart.

"She never saw her family again, never knew her mob again. Then she died giving birth to my great-grandmother, who was known as Black Maggie, who was the mother of my grandmother Yvonne.

"Nan never really talked about her family or their history, and we still don't know what mob my great-great-grandmother was from, all the written records were destroyed.

"But when I think of that 13-year-old girl, sent on a boat from warm Brisbane to freezing Hobart, taken away from her family and culture, it's heartbreaking. I think of my own daughter and all of the young

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Indigenous kids who still live with trauma now.

"That's why I'm so passionate about giving back. I'm a firm believer that it is up to every individual to run with any opportunity they are given, but we need to build that capacity within them and that confidence and self belief to do that.

"Pulling yourself up by the bootstraps is great, what we're trying to do is give the kids access to some boots. The rest is up to them."

Apanui said Murra Pathways helped create that access through its free and flexible program.

He said while school visits remained central, their career expos were growing exponentially.

"We always thought the school visits were the crown jewel of the program, but when we held our first career expo at Bond University last year the response was incredible," he said.

"So now we're holding four expos in 2026 between May and August – Tweed Heads, Gold Coast, Brisbane and Rockhampton. Next year we're looking at about eight, we're so happy with the reaction from both students and employers.

"We're really proud that this is free for the kids and the schools. There are no strings, we're doing this with minimal funding, it's pretty much all voluntary and coming from

conversations and relationships we both have with partner corporations.

"The program is all about presenting opportunity and building capacity within each individual, and being flexible so we can mould it to fit any specific circumstance and take it to different schools and regions."

Lovell said he was fortunate to find new possibilities through sport, but his success was also due to the mentorship of his own father – a world champion woodchopper – which gave him the confidence to chase opportunities.

That includes his role now as Bond University's head of football, where 38 of the women he has coached have been drafted into the AFLW, more than any other club in Australia.

"My father won 17 world titles as a woodchopper and I just saw his resilience, his determination to succeed and his work ethic, and I just watched and learned," said Lovell, who earned the nickname 'Chopper' thanks to his own skills as a chip off the old block.

"He would always pass on his knowledge and experience to the younger generations of wood choppers, including me, and he was my role-model. He showed me what mentorship was. Those skills he taught me I transferred to football, to coaching and to life as well.

"Coaching and mentoring are in my soul ... I just want to give back like my father did."

Lovell said both he and Apanui firmly believed in the capability of Indigenous youth.

"The people who triumph over adversity, that's wonderful ... but it's bloody hard, it's the exception rather than the rule," he said.

"Rather than just sit around and whinge about a problem, we decided to actually do something about it.

"We want to try to level the playing field for Indigenous kids so they can match their potential to their achievement."

And that's the gap they are determined to close.

