

The Final Quarter review - exhilarating Adam Goodes documentary pulses with urgency

Luke Buckmaster - The Guardian - 30 May, 2019

Andrew Bolt, Alan Jones and Sam Newman haunt Ian Darling's film like ranting apparitions



Racism is a very hard, uncomfortable thing to talk about. (Image: Getty)

Way back in the distant dark ages of Australian history – those atavistic times when the nation was young, barbaric and bigoted – one of the greatest players in one of the country's most cherished sports leagues ended his career not in fanfare, but as a figure at the centre of an ugly debate about racism. I am referring of course to the final quarter, as it were, in the career of Sydney Swans star Adam Goodes, who chalked up a whopping 372 games in total – the most of any Indigenous player in history.

And by “dark ages” I mean the last three years in Goodes's decorated career, until his retirement in 2015. This is the time period captured in director Ian Darling's exhilarating and confronting documentary, which premieres at the Sydney film festival on 7 June and is intended to spark a reassessment of the national conversation at the centre of which Goodes found himself. At various points during this film I felt cold shivers, and left the experience shaken – not by what The Final Quarter says about the sport of AFL, but what it suggests about this country.

There were always people who argued that Goodes was not a victim of racism – just a King Kong reference here and an “ape” joke there, set to the soundtrack of thousands of punters booing from the stands. If it was hard to mount that fingers-in-the-ears argument back then, it seems almost impossible now – though the peanut gallery of outspoken conservative commentators, who haunt this film like ranting apparitions (among them Andrew Bolt and Alan Jones), are hardly likely to show contrition any time soon.

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The Final Quarter is a post-mortem of this dark period in Australian sporting and cultural history, comprised entirely of archival footage aired at the time. The obvious inspirations for Darling’s film – which is more a work of assembly than construction – are the documentaries of British film-maker Asif Kapadia, particularly his rousing 2010 sports film Senna. Darling’s approach differs in that his intention in many respects is more ambitious, and certainly more relevant to Australian society, than the more familiar “price of fame” and “portrait of obsession” style narratives.

The Final Quarter opens with a clip of Sam Newman frothing from the mouth and berating Goodes on The Footy Show. “They’re booing you because you’re acting like a jerk,” he bellows, going on to ridicule the league for promoting diversity-related initiatives and declaring that, as a white heterosexual male, he is “waiting for my day to come”. This sets the scene for exploration of one of the film’s key messages: that words matter, and they ought to be used responsibly.

Goodes himself clearly believes this, and his ongoing presence in the film (which he supports but was not involved in) is a balm to the rash of madness around him. At the centre of a maelstrom, confronted by all kinds of ugly behaviour, the player himself remains composed and eloquent, offering nuanced perspectives. Addressing the media the day after famously being called an “ape” by a 13-year-old girl in the stands, for instance, Goodes rightly criticises the teenager’s behaviour while calling for compassion – insisting that “it’s not her fault,” that “kids are innocent” and “we need to support her”.



Documentarian Ian Darling, director of *The Final Quarter*. Photograph: Shark Island

The methodology of *The Final Quarter* and other aforementioned films of its ilk can have a distancing effect – many of the traditional powers of the motion picture medium (cinematography, for instance) having been surrendered for more curatorial kind of approach. But this is not some dry academic exercise. A supercharged current courses through it, Darling having created less a documentary than a kind of electric cine-essay, pulsing with energy and urgency.

Despite much of the material being confronting, *The Final Quarter* is also inspiring, with a message that each of us will be remembered ultimately for two things: what we say and what we do. And so it is also a film about the purpose and value of legacies. By calling out racism, and by refusing to be put inside a box where the powers that be might have liked him to remain, Goodes unquestionably made life harder for himself.

But he also created a narrative, if not a reason for being, far more important than any act of sporting prowess. Goodes's role in attempting to make Australia a more educated and tolerant country will be remembered long after all the marks, kicks, and tackles have been forgotten. Darling also makes the point that we can always learn from history – whether that history is found in an ancient scroll inside a museum, or via television footage from the old, dark, distant days of 2015.

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