

Footy, community and wellbeing



Michael Mitchell

I have always believed that footy in our communities is about a lot more than just the game.

It's where we gather, talk and heal, it's where families come together, and it is where young people connect with Elders.

Footy represents a space of culture, connection, and pride for our people.

This spirit was front and centre in a session I co-delivered in Mullewa earlier this year in my capacity as a trainer for the 'Tackle Your Feelings' program.

Tackle Your Feelings is a mental-health and wellbeing program founded by the AFL Coaches Association, AFL Players' Association, and Zurich Insurance in 2018.

It offers free mental-health training for community football players and coaches, committee members, umpires and other club support staff.

I am honoured to be delivering the program through an Aboriginal lens to ten communities around Western Australia.

Our approach to delivering the program in Indigenous communities is built around restoring cultural processes and increasing capacity through footy clubs and in community.

What makes it special isn't the framework, it's the way it's done.

No rushing, no token visits. Just showing up often, taking our time, letting the conversations unfold naturally, and planning actions that make sense for that particular Mob.

Our intention going in was to seek understanding and build clarity.

One of our first success stories was with the Port Wyndham Crocs; their journey has been incredible.

The team, the club, and the whole community have grown stronger through our approach – both mentally and emotionally, and in playing together as a strong team.

The best part is that the success belongs to the team and the community.

Our role has been to listen, support, and walk alongside – not to lead, and this is what community ownership should look like.

Another club where Tackle Your Feelings has had



Michael Mitchell delivering a session in Mullewa earlier this year as part of a Tackling your Feelings program. The program focuses on mental-health and wellbeing for community football players, coaches, umpires and support staff.

substantial involvement is in Mullewa.

During one of our first sessions with the Mullewa Football Club, we decided to adapt the usual script – instead of a presentation, we just had a yarn with no time limits; we wanted to allow the community to freely discuss their issues.

Over a hundred people were on the oval training – men, women, and kids – and in the club room we had fifty from the men's team attend the session.

Before long, everyone put their phones down and engaged with us and each other, talking about wellbeing, identity, and community.

During this session, we introduced the Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) Diagram (created by Gee, Dudgeon, Schultz, Hart and Kelly, 2013) – a model which places "self" at the centre,

surrounded by connections to spirituality and ancestors, body and behaviours, mind and emotions, family and kinship, community, culture, and Country.

We talked about the cultural, social, historical, and political factors which shape wellbeing, and what that really means for us as Aboriginal people.

I still remember a "light bulb moment" from this session. As we went through each part of the SEWB diagram, an Elder stood up and said, "That's what we're talking about. We got to get our spirit back. We got to go back on Country. We got to do things culturally – the old way."

This statement resonated with the whole group, and certainly with me.

We also yarned about the principles of respect and reciprocity and about the realities our communities face,

like experiencing grief and loss more often than most other Australians.

The SEWB diagram helped people make sense of those experiences, showing how our wellbeing is tied to our culture, our relationships, and our history.

Our conversation throughout signalled mutual care, engagement, and shared understanding. Important moments like the collective decision by attendees to put down their mobile phones, and the Elder's spontaneous affirmation of the SEWB diagram, told us we were on the right track with our approach, as these instances reflected community buy-in and a connection to the program's cultural foundations.

This experience has reinforced for me the importance of community-led

dialogue and culturally-grounded engagement.

From the Mullewa session came a new plan: to hold a men's camp on my Country in Shark Bay, bringing together Elders, leadership groups, and young people.

Later, we'll hold a broader community event.

Going forward, I'm going to ensure cultural processes, values, and community connections remain central to our approach.

Footy might bring us together – but it's the connection and sense of belonging that keep us strong.

Michael Mitchell is a Yamatji man of Nyamal and Malgana descent. He started his working life as an electrician and then went on to play professional Australian Rules Football for Claremont and Richmond, where he was awarded Goal and Mark of the year (1990) and was named one of the Richmond Ten Tiger Treasures of the century by winning Goal of the Century (2020). Michael began his career in Indigenous health and social and emotional wellbeing by developing a youth training program in the Carnarvon region, developing skills to work in the fishing industry. Michael managed and coordinated several Aboriginal Community Controlled Services and gained a degree focused on Indigenous mental health from Curtin University. During the 15 years he was in the service as the Service Manager of Wungen Kartup, an Aboriginal mental health program, there was never a suicide of a client under its care. Michael is a member of the AFL's mental-health committee and works as a consultant in Aboriginal mental-health and social and emotional wellbeing.