

# **A World of One: Poorne Yarriworri and Australian Sport**

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Poorne Yarriworri (c. 1844–1889), better known as Albert ‘Pompey’ Austin, inhabited the smallest possible world—a world of one. He was the only Indigenous person to play top-level Australian football in Victoria in the nineteenth century. Since then only around 40 Indigenous Victorians have followed in his footsteps, though in 2020 another young man from the same Framlingham Aboriginal community, Jamarra Ugle-Hagan, was chosen as the first pick in the Australian Football League draft. The current over-representation of Indigenous people in Australian football derives from the selection of players from the Noongar and other groups in Western Australia, the Northern Territory and the Tiwi Islands, rather than Victorians.

Opportunities for Indigenous players to reach the top level in the colony and later the state were marginally better in South Australia where a small number of men from the mission at Point McLeay (Raukkan), who participated in a series of games in Adelaide in 1885, were subsequently selected for senior South Australian teams in the next few years. Harry Hewitt, Alfred Spender, William Rankin and John Wilson were among them. Hewitt was selected for several teams in the early 1890s, including the representative Southern South Australian team against Northern in 1892. He also played with Port Adelaide when they took on Fitzroy from the Victorian Football Association in 1891. Hewitt became one of the promoters of Aboriginal corroborees, often for white audiences, and preached temperance. He was an excellent cricketer (Hay 2019, 216–18).

In Western Australia, where the Victorian game supplanted rugby as the code of choice in the 1890s, there were one or two excellent talents who reached the top level. Jimmy Melbourne is the best known and he turned out for West Perth, South Fremantle and Subiaco. He was a Nyoongar, the first of his clan who are now largely responsible for the over-representation of Indigenous people in Australian football today. After the Second World War, a conveyor belt of talent brought a number of Indigenous stars first to Western Australian clubs and then on to Victorian Football League teams. The Northern Territory and Tiwi Islander talents broke through into the senior game in the second half of the twentieth century, encouraged by perceptive Victorian coaches led by Kevin Sheedy, though Queenslander Frank Ivory was an Aboriginal star in the late 1880s and 1890s, before switching to rugby, and represented Queensland in that code.

In Victoria Pompey Austin was far more than a footballer, and so intersected with several other worlds. At various times throughout his short life he was an athlete (pedestrian, as runners were known in those days), cricketer, possibly a boxer, racehorse owner, jockey and horse-breaker, artist, musician, explorer, entertainer and public speaker. His memory lived on after his death, and his son and grandson carried the ‘Pompey’ sobriquet into the next two generations. During the First World War his name was referenced by soldiers and by sportsmen reflecting on their own careers. Only later in the mid-twentieth century did he disappear from public consciousness until Mark Pennings rediscovered his first and only game for the Geelong football club in the opening match of the 1872 season, and Jan

Critchett wrote about the three generations of Pompeys (Critchett 48–73). Trevor Ruddell followed with an article on his sporting career, and so sports historians are aware of his existence, but the wider Victorian and Australian community and even some of Pompey's descendants have very little knowledge of this remarkable human being (Ruddell 89–105). The first biography of the man himself was published in 2020 (Hay 2020; further references for material referred to in this chapter can be found there).

Indigenous people who sought to enter or impinge on the new circumstances in which they found themselves had to learn or adapt a whole range of new skills. On the frontier they met white men who were also having to do so, but when Indigenous people encroached further into the worlds of the newcomers, they encountered a variety of more specialised occupations and activities, each with its own features, skills, rules and characteristics that had to be learned in order to take part. Pompey and those of his contemporaries who were determined to take on the newcomers entered a range of different worlds, some of which were larger than football was in the 1870s. Where Pompey stood out was in the range of these activities he was prepared to tackle.



Aboriginal men and boys at Framlingham c. 1867. Pompey is in the middle of the back row. Source: Jan Critchett via Maisie Clarke.

Telling his story, like that of his contemporaries, remains controversial. One reviewer of my previous book on *Aboriginal People and Australian Football in the Nineteenth Century* argued that a book that did not engage with oral traditions relating to Indigenous sports people from the nineteenth century was a failure, but could not point to any such traditions (Bodman 782–3). Those that do exist turn out to be convoluted mixtures of Indigenous and non-Indigenous material interlinked in multiple ever-changing ways. The major and most valuable source turns out to be the sports pages of the contemporary newspapers now digitised in the National Library of Australia's Trove collection available to all via the internet—an exceptionally valuable contribution to Australian culture, not just sports history.

Contemporary newspapers are redolent of their times, regularly crudely racist, contemptuous of Indigenous people and their attempts to cope with the consequences of the European invasion and blaming the victims for their plight. But the sports pages are often exceptional, recognising Indigenous performance on the field and treating the participants with a degree of respect not shown elsewhere. Normally they consist of straight reportage, which enables researchers to find what Indigenous people did, even if they cannot reach what they thought about their experience or their motivation for taking part.

The richest source is the press in regional and remote areas of Victoria, and sometimes their original reports are picked up by the metropolitan papers and those in other states. In the second half of the nineteenth century there was an explosion of local newspapers and nearly all of them had some coverage of contemporary sport. Horse racing, coursing, quoits and ploughing matches received equal or greater coverage than what we regard as modern team and individual sports for much of the century. Individual sports including boxing (pugilism) and athletics (pedestrianism) saw a growth in reportage, while team games such as cricket and football were not in anything like the dominant position they hold today. This is not to underestimate the importance of the latter codes as they were often the glue that held local communities together. To give just a single example, in Healesville in the Upper Yarra Valley, the local paper contemplated the ‘death’ of the local community if there was to be no football in the coming winter and was deeply concerned should the Aboriginal team from the Coranderrk station be unable to take part in the competition (*Healesville & Yarra Glen Guardian*, 26 April 1912, 2).

Without the local press the story of Aboriginal sport in the nineteenth century could not be told and the biography of Poorne Yarriworri could not be written. The references to him are brief, scattered, discontinuous and often almost opaque. There were other Indigenous people to whom the name ‘Pompey’ was attached, so extreme care is necessary to determine which one is being mentioned. For example, in 1886 a young man called Pompey and his friend Talampo were arrested in Victoria for stealing a horse. This was not our man, who was in the Kimberley at the time. In other cases, there is only a brief reference to a Pompey and it is possible that some of these may have been misidentified, though the balance of probabilities is in his favour in each case that has been relied on here.

So, who was this man and what did he bring to the small worlds he inhabited? We have nothing from the man himself. There are a few examples of what claim to be reported speech from him, nearly all from court cases in which he was involved, though it is uncertain if he ever uttered the words that are attributed to him. In his later life some of the reports of what he is claimed to have said are demonstrably false. He certainly embellished his own biography and may have come to believe his own propaganda, and he seems to have been very capable of misleading others. He said on one occasion that he had gone to England with the Aboriginal cricket team and been presented to Queen Victoria (Clement and Bridge 30; Mulvaney and Harcourt). In 1868 an Indigenous team from the Gariwerd (Grampians) area in Western Victoria was the first Australian team to play cricket in England. At least two of Pompey’s contemporaries at Framlingham had been members of that team. Neither of Pompey’s claims was true and he may simply have been trying to upstage another Aboriginal man who was presented to the Duke of Edinburgh on the latter’s visit to the Western District of Victoria. While incarcerated for horse stealing in Ararat gaol he was said to be unable to read and write, though we know from other evidence he could certainly do the former at least. The Colac historian Isaac Hebb asserted he read the Bible fluently (Hebb 3). Curiously, he had two days added to his sentence in Ararat gaol in 1881 because he tore pages out of a

library book. Did he want the information contained therein or just want to use the paper to light a fire or a smoke?

Pompey was born within a few years of the first arrival of settlers/invasers in the Western District of Victoria in 1834. There is no extant birth certificate and his most likely date of birth is between 1844 and 1846. Jan Critchett reports a family story that he fought against the invaders, but this seems very unlikely (48). A frontier guerrilla war went on for much of the 1840s and 1850s and the initial destructive impact of men, sheep, cattle and disease was devastating. Pompey may have been educated at a short-lived mission station near Birregurra, just east of Colac. According to his marriage certificate in 1867, his parents were Charlie and Alice, regarded today as the first representatives of the traditional custodians of the land of the Western Maar, which encompasses much of south-west Victoria.

There is a small amount of material about Pompey Austin in the *Victorian Police Gazette*, though almost all of this is reported, usually quite accurately, though sometimes facetiously, in the local press. The reports of the superintendents of the Framlingham Aboriginal Station, just north of Warrnambool in Victoria's Western District, contain only a couple of references to him. The most substantial of these, from 1882, reflects a falling-out with William Goodall, the superintendent of Framlingham station, who had high hopes for the young man but then found the latter's assertion of a spiky independence very hard to take. He believed Pompey had a nefarious influence on the other Indigenous people:

The conduct of the Aborigines, for the most part, has been very exemplary, although I have had some trouble with three or four, among whom was released convict, Pompey Austin. I do not think this man should be allowed to remain on any of the stations. I have given him many opportunities of amendment, but without any good results. In fact his influence is always bad, and he is never satisfied unless he is using his endeavours to corrupt some of the more pliable ones. (Goodall 5)

Pompey had been jailed earlier in the year on a charge of stealing a saddle. Getting around Victoria to take part in athletic and other sporting events required a means of transport and Pompey sometimes 'borrowed' a horse and its accoutrements to do so. For a brief period he seems to have had a horse of his own. He probably used his substantial winnings from a number of athletic events at Belfast, now Port Fairy, to buy a racehorse on which he won a hurdle race, riding the horse himself. He was a skilled horse-breaker.

It was his sporting career—as a pedestrian, cricketer, footballer and possibly a boxer—on which his contemporary and later reputation rested. Pompey first came to public notice as a hurdler, high jumper and flat racer. He took part in a number of athletics meetings in the Western District in the 1860s and 1870s. His breakthrough season was in 1872 when he won every race in which he competed at the Geelong Friendly Societies meeting on Easter Monday against some of the best local runners. He returned again in May for another meeting where he seems to have performed less well, but the following day he was selected to play for the Geelong Football Club against Carlton, the previous year's top team, in the opening game of the new season. The Geelong team was supposed to be captained by the Victorian cricket and football star, Tom Wills, but the notoriously unreliable Wills was missing when the game started. He turned up later on and joined in. Neither side scored a goal.

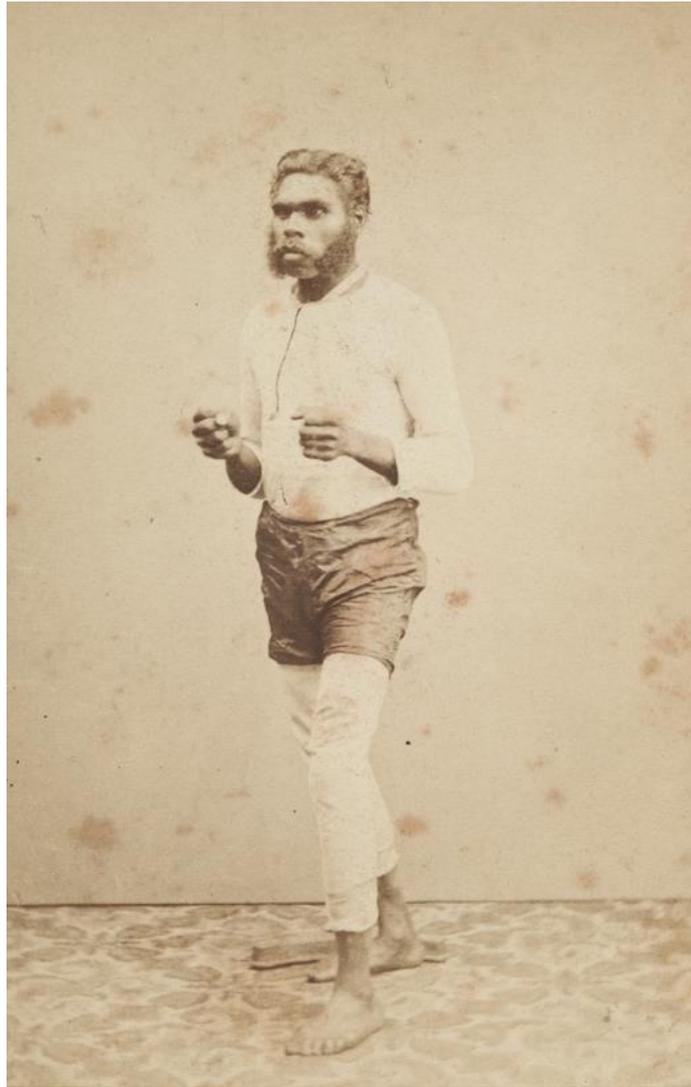
Pompey was poleaxed by a Carlton opponent in the opening stages of the game. This must have caused him to consider whether he risked his athletic career and the income it generated if he engaged in the violent clashes that were part of the early game and for a long time

thereafter. He never got the chance to play at the top level again, though he took part in local competitions in the Western District for Framlingham and Cobden and in the Ballarat area for Albion Imperial, often being named among the best players for his team.

Aboriginal teams were discriminated against by the Victorian Football Association and later the Victorian Football League in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Requests to play matches against metropolitan clubs were regularly ignored or refused. So Indigenous teams and individual players never had a chance of testing themselves regularly at the highest level, the best if not the only way in which they could have improved their individual and team performances. When the South Melbourne team came to the Western District on a rare occasion and played against a combined local team, they won so easily they did not bother changing ends, even though they were playing against the wind. It was not until 1913 that Carlton became the first Victorian Football League club to play an Indigenous team when they took on the men from Lake Tyers Mission in Gippsland. Carlton had been planning its end-of-season trip to Sydney, but that was cancelled because of a smallpox outbreak there.

In the summer Pompey played cricket for Framlingham along with the Couzens brothers who went to England with the Aboriginal team in 1868. In 1873–74 Pompey played with Framlingham against teams from Warrnambool and the press reported that some players from Framlingham might be included in the local team of 22 that took on W.G. Grace's English tourists in January 1874. This did not happen but Pompey would probably not have been considered anyway as he was engaged in the pedestrian circuit at the time the game was played. Later he played cricket for Terang and probably Cobden as well. Cobden did not have a local newspaper at that time so the information has to be extracted from exiguous reports in the Warrnambool and Camperdown press. The name Austin appears frequently but it is uncertain whether the person mentioned is Pompey.

There is a widespread belief that Pompey was also a boxer. One of the few surviving photographs has him in a classical boxing pose, and there are several later references to him as a pugilist. His descendants included boxers. His son and grandson boxed and Lawrence 'Baby Cassius' Austin, another descendant, became an Australian champion, but the contemporary evidence is scant and no report on a bout in which he was involved has been found. Other boxers called Pompey fought in Melbourne and in South Australia but again it is clear that these were not Poorne Yarriworri.



Albert Pompey Austin in boxing pose. State Library of Victoria.

Pompey was not alone as an Aboriginal person in using sport to gain an income and establish some degree of control over his own life and career. He did not present as a victim despite the vicissitudes inflicted on him. If he is the only Indigenous footballer to play at the top level in the nineteenth century, he had Indigenous peers at the local level in this and other sports. Perhaps none had quite the all-round ability of Pompey. Bobby MacDonald, William Cooper, Dick Rowan, Robert Wandin, junior, and Bobby Kinnear, first Indigenous winner of the Stawell Gift, were gifted athletes and most were competent or better at team games including cricket and football. Rowan probably came closest in football, being given a trial by South Melbourne in 1892, then refused permission to play with them the following season. The grounds given by the Board for the Protection of the Aborigines of Victoria were that if he were allowed to do so, others would follow.

All of the superintendents of the missions and stations around the perimeter of Victoria had problems with Indigenous sports people. H.P. Bogisch at Ebenezer Mission in the Wimmera had to offer his men wages in the 1890s to get them to work because they were paid for playing cricket and football by clubs in the neighbouring towns of Antwerp, Horsham and Dimboola. Daniel Matthews at Maloga and Cummeragunja on the Murray initially tried to use sport as part of his 'civilising mission' but quickly found that participation by his charges

in games with and against the invaders led to their involvement in drink and gambling. They returned to the missions with a heightened sense of their own worth and capacity to take on the newcomers. Indigenous sportsmen also learned that white people did not all share the beliefs of those placed over them in the missions. Nevertheless, there are sportsmen who returned from encounters with other religious views that they then tried to pass on to their kin and others in the missions. Bullchanach (Bullocky), who went to England with the Aboriginal cricket team in 1868, and (Sir) Doug Nicholls, from Cummeragunja on the Murray, who played football for Northcote and Fitzroy in the 1930s, are the best-known examples.

Where Pompey stood out from his contemporaries was in his wide involvement in off-field activities. He was a skilled tracker. In 1879 William Goodall offered to take some of his charges from Framlingham and Coranderk to help find Ned Kelly and his gang, but the Chief Secretary of Victoria turned down the suggestion. In 1883 and 1886 William O'Donnell led expeditions to the Kimberley region in the north-west of Western Australia when gold was discovered there. He took Pompey with him on the second occasion, probably for liaison with the local Indigenous people, as well as for his tracking skills.

Mary Durack's *Kings in Grass Castles* (1959) reports Pompey helping lead groups of diggers to and from the goldfields. When her father welcomed Pompey to the family property he entertained the company by "singing musical hall songs hot off the London stage" (283). O'Donnell named a rocky outcrop near the current Argyle Diamond field 'Pompey's Pillar', which it retains to this day.

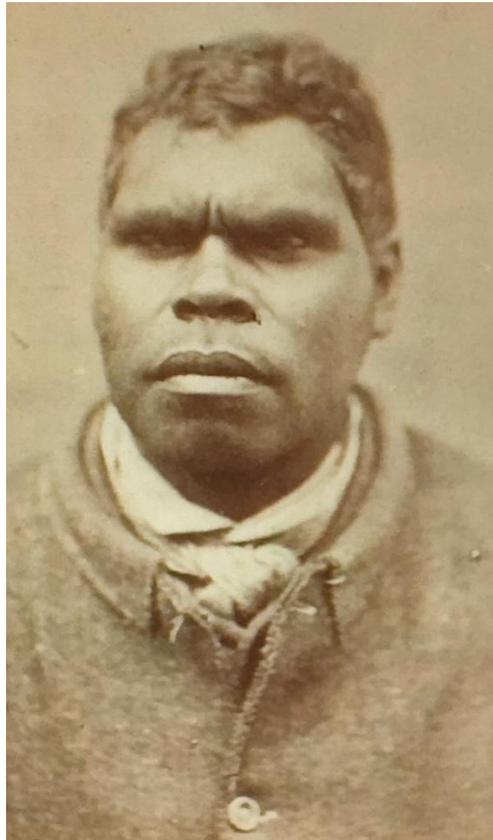


Explorers in Western Australia, *Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser*, 20 March 1886, 587.

Pompey was an accomplished public speaker. In 1888 he was entertaining a crowd at the corner in Ballarat, the local equivalent of Hyde Park corner in London where people could address crowds of onlookers. According to newspaper reports, on this occasion Pompey was talking about the political situation and the prospects for war. This apparently did not generate much reward, but spotting some Scots in his audience he broke into Scottish songs and extolled the beauties of the Scottish countryside. Then the money rolled in! (*Ballarat Star*, 25 April 1888, 2).

He turned up at the Warrnambool newspaper in 1884 with one of his artistic works that the paper damned with faint praise (*Colac Herald*, 25 March 1884, 2). It is permissible to wonder whether he had been around today his offering might have been regarded much more highly.

Pompey fell foul of the law on a number of occasions. In Victoria in nearly all cases it was for stealing a horse and/or a saddle. When he was in the Kimberley he was picked up for over indulging in alcohol. Public drinking was the classic Indigenous misdemeanour. Jan Critchett has calculated that Indigenous people in the Western District were disproportionately confined in jails and lock-ups in the 1860s. Roughly 70 per cent of those were for alcohol-related offences (32). Pompey was not one of the offenders in Victoria in his running days, but he was twice picked up for being the worse for wear in public while he was in Western Australia. Pompey himself said he was drunk later in life when accused of robbing a bushman on his return to Victoria (*Ballarat Star*, 13 December 1884, 2).



Albert Pompey Austin in 1880. Source: Victorian Public Record Office.

We know very little about Pompey's relationships with his family. He spent some considerable time away from Framlingham, where his wife, Rosanna Francis, whom he married in 1867, and his children lived. In January 1873 he was accused of deserting Rosanna, but at the time he was probably taking part in an athletic meeting at Smythesdale, one of the major centres of pedestrianism in rural Victoria. He was discharged later that year. Pompey and Rosanna had five children. Chris, the third son, inherited the Pompey name and in turn it passed on to his son, Cyril. Cyril was the mentor of another significant and influential Indigenous man, 'Banjo' Clarke, the subject of a biography by Camilla Chance (*Wisdom Man*, Melbourne: Viking, 2003).

There is a continuing danger that the absence of Aboriginal biographies from the accounts of the period of settler colonial governance will give a misleading impression of the extent to which Indigenous people 'pushed back' against the newcomers. Many of them refused to be treated as victims and led active and varied lives. Pompey's life was a triumph of the human spirit and an example of the ability of individuals to overcome intolerable circumstances and some, though not all, of the restrictions placed upon them. Pompey was non-political in the narrow sense, but his whole life was a cultural and political statement. It was a black life that mattered but has been virtually ignored for far too long.

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