

**[Review] Ellen van Neerven, *Personal Score: Sport, Culture, Identity*.
University of Queensland Press, 2023. 384 pp.**

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Personal Score by Ellen van Neerven provides readers with a glimpse into the rarely articulated world of Indigenous and queer sporting identity. I approached this book with enthusiasm in early 2023, as a Barkandji woman beginning my doctoral research into the experiences of Indigenous women and gender diverse people in sport. In the same year I began playing Australian Rules Football at a local club in Naarm. EvN¹ describes the tensions many of us feel while playing organised sport. The racism we experience is validated in this work, and at the same time our pride in community, identity and belonging is reinforced.

Though my doctoral research was in the very early stages when I first read the book, it was quickly becoming apparent that literature on my chosen research topic was not readily available, with the field being largely dominated by male authors writing about men. Therefore, I jumped at the chance to read a non-male-centric book about sport written by an Indigenous trans-nonbinary person.

The experiences I am researching, and the ones so beautifully described within the pages of *Personal Score*, are well-known and understood by our community. The experiences of Indigenous women and gender diverse people in sport have been historically overlooked for a multitude of reasons. The complex web of colonial sexism that engulfs us all has historically ensured complete exclusion of Indigenous women and gender diverse people from mainstream sporting spaces, and more recently there remains a perceived inferiority of sport that is not male-centric (Foley et al.; Carlson et al.). Athletes continue to experience ridicule, objectification and racial discrimination whilst also not receiving appropriate pay or opportunity (Pavlidis et al.; Foley et al.). The lack of respect and regard for non-male sport has translated to a lack of substantial writing on the topic. In the last few decades Evonne Goolagong-Cawley and Cathy Freeman have become household names, and more recently Ash Barty has joined the ranks of well-known and loved Indigenous athletes. However, aside from a couple of biographies, there has been limited critical engagement with their social and political contributions within or beyond sport. Meanwhile, select Indigenous male athletes and the sports they are involved in have become the focus point for a number of academic and public critical discourses

¹ I will refer to Ellen van Neerven as EvN throughout this piece in line with their preference. I take this personal approach due to the intimacy in the experiences depicted in *Personal Score*, that resonate strongly with my own experiences, and those of many First Nations people.

surrounding sport, imperialism, racism and ongoing colonialism (Farquharson and Marjoribanks; Spaaij et al.; Hallinan and Judd; Coram and Hallinan; Judd; Coram).

EvN's book *Personal Score* is a breath of fresh air in this space, as a clear articulation of the experiences of an Indigenous trans-non-binary person in sport. *Personal Score* is broken into four parts and 46 chapters, which will enthrall the reader every step of the way. These four parts are constructed chronologically, moving throughout EvN's life from early interactions with sport to critical discussion of systematic and globalised racism that they have experienced and witnessed throughout their career. The reader will find this is a quick read, not because of the book's size, but due to the captivating nature of content and diversity of its display with poems, narratives and non-fiction elements intertwined.

EvN writes in a mix of non-fiction narrative and poetry, providing readers with a holistic understanding of their experiences, and that of many First Nations people. The power of EvN's words is evident in that you don't just read this book but feel it too. You feel the wet dewy grass as EvN does soccer training in the morning as a child; you feel the bruises and scratches from games as they get older and tougher; you feel the desire and lust as they fall in and out of love; you feel the enduring love of family; you feel their connection to Country; you feel their pain and shame as they are ridiculed due to their identity; you feel their strength and spirit run deep through these pages and their life.

Throughout this piece the reader also feels a consistent undercurrent of jeopardy, violence and danger. This jeopardy is portrayed in a range of different ways, including verbal, emotional, psychological, physical harm, with varying degrees of separation from EvN. These stories discuss colonial violence, with historical context and legacies continuing today, including verbal harassment, bullying, and racism. This feeling of jeopardy is compounded by EvN's descriptions of being scared. Scared of dogs before they got their family pet and best friend Max; scared of the ball; scared of contact; scared of walking alone at night; scared of surgery; scared of making mistakes. However, this constant threat of danger in many forms is intertwined with a beautiful bravery, generosity and kindness that displays the complex tapestry of not only EvN but their family, community and blakfellas collectively. Through *Personal Score* EvN delivers in their quest to share their unique story and provide a new lens for viewing sport and culture in contemporary Australia. Their writing is intimate and honest, providing factual examples of Indigenous dispossession, displacement and racism, and a clear path forward for all people to speak more closely with the land and with each other.

Not only does *Personal Score* articulate the generally unspoken experiences of Indigenous women and gender diverse people playing sport, but also emphasises that sport is played on Country and our interactions with sport align with our interactions with the environment. EvN speaks of connection to Country and land through physical activity,

specifically movement, embodiment and sweat. They speak of how sport has been played on this land for millennia, and the comparison between Indigenous ways of doing and Western in the sporting realm. Sport historically for First Nations peoples was part of ceremony, community and governance, elements of our lives that have been systematically threatened since colonisation began. Sport in the Western sense represents, literally and figuratively, domination, submission, embarrassment and ridicule. These parts of sport, which many Australians hold dear, are not traditionally part of Indigenous sport, and our traditional elements of sports are now maintained in Blak spaces. For example, the annual NSW Koori Knockout tournament is regularly touted a ‘modern day corroboree’ (van Neerven 186; Norman). This tournament does represent triumph for one lucky team however more so is an event filled with love, community and connection, which speaks to the spiritual elements of sport which live on in the lives of First Nations peoples.

EvN’s poetic skills lend themselves to the vibrant descriptions in this book. To be able to display the deep, immeasurable, and impactful nature of Indigenous connection to Country, community and our embodiment is something that I have seen achieved more in the performing arts or fine arts, yet EvN achieves this brilliantly. In April 2024, Melbourne Theatre Company hosted the spectacular production titled *37* written by Nathan Drummond and directed by Isaac Drandic. For me, as an Indigenous footy player, *Personal Score* accomplishes the same viscerally emotive response evoked by this play. Navigating the space of sharing our experiences as Indigenous people in sporting spaces is tenuous and challenging, yet both these works achieve this in powerful ways, through vastly different means.

Personal Score landed close to home for me, as the story takes place in a few key locations, including in Naarm, Wurundjeri Woiwurrung Country, as EvN lived in Parkville and played for the Brunswick Zebras for a time. Through these stories they speak of key locations that are familiar to anyone who lives in or knows ‘northside’ Melbourne, including the Merri Creek and Lygon Street. The other key location is their childhood home in Meaanjin on Yuggera, Turrbal, Quandamooka Country in Samford, Brisbane, through which they speak of that locality but also greater Brisbane including West End and the GABBA. I particularly recommend this book to those who are interested in sport, Indigenous and queer identity, connection to Country, community and belonging. This is a book you will read and re-read again, recommend to friends, and trawl back through looking for quotes and ideas to share with others.

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