

*Enabling Better  
Health Outcomes  
Through Sport*

MARANA DYARGAL



*John Evans*

**Interviewed By:**

Professor  
Robynne Quiggin

Professor John Evans is a Wiradjuri man from Lake Cargelligo (Euabalong, Western New South Wales). John is the Indigenous lead of the Indigenous Health discipline in the School of Public Health at the University of Technology Sydney. John's research has a focus on sport and physical activity, including type two diabetes, and housing and infrastructure in Indigenous communities. John currently leads two Australian Research Council (ARC) grants. The first investigates the pathways of elite Indigenous athletes and the second analyses sport and physical activity in Indigenous communities.

*“The underlying philosophy is that research should be about trying to find those enablers in the community that allow people to have a better life through improved health outcomes. More specifically, getting people involved in sport from a very young age, right through to the end of life, means they’ll be much healthier, and they won’t suffer from things such as type two diabetes, cardiovascular disease or stroke.”*

John shares his experiences of being involved in research for the past twenty years and discusses what he describes as the “vexed issues” of working through respectful ethics processes in partnership with Indigenous communities. He tackles the issue of working with large scale, mainstream datasets, where the data has been collected without strong

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community engagement or regard to protocols. John shares his insights on the challenges he has faced in engaging in participatory approaches with communities and some of the competing priorities that arise when it comes to designing and enacting ethical research approaches.

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#### About John

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John Evans has extensive experience in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander physical activity and sport research across both qualitative and quantitative disciplines. John has built an academic career, which has blended personal experience from the sport and physical activity industry with a professional career in the academy. John is recognised as a leading academic in the areas of Indigenous sport sociology, Indigenous sport and physical activity studies, pedagogy and coaching. John Evans is one of a small number of Indigenous academics with the skills that can traverse both qualitative and quantitative methodologies and incorporate an Indigenous standpoint. His expertise has been sort by a number of national sporting organisations such as Netball Australia, The National Rugby League and the Australian Rugby Union.

***RQ Can you tell us about the kind of relationship building or engagement with stakeholders and about any consultation or negotiation you have done whilst scoping or thinking through your projects?***

**JE** This is something that I probably need to get better at. And that's because, hand on heart, I can't say that any of the research I've done has come from a community driven approach. Normally we go to talk to people in the community and ask, what do you think about this research? Do you think it's going to bring about a good change in your community? I'd much prefer to be in a position where we respond to a community initiative. For instance, in the research area of type two diabetes, if we had a group come to us and say, oh John, what we'd like to see is research done in X, Y, and Z, rather than what you want to do in M,N,O,P. That's always the difficulty with talking about our research, because normally, when we think about research, we think about whether this is right, wrong or indifferent. We are thinking about our careers as academics and being inside the institution.

The ideal situation is where community organisations decide what research they want to be done. It doesn't mean other people can't do research, but I think that would be a much better position to be in. The key is being in a situation where we are more responsive to what communities want. On the flip side, the work we're doing with the State Government is about work that's already been commenced by the state government and they asked us to come in and evaluate or monitor what they're doing. So it's already a flawed process. Luckily there's already been a significant amount of consultation done with the community on the two housing projects we are working on. We are coming in at the side a little bit and working off some of the consultation that's been done between the Department of Planning and Innovation and Environment and the Local Aboriginal Lands Council.

There is a relationship built by them. We are reporting on and providing some advice to communities about what they should be doing as far as housing and infrastructure.

What we fail to talk about is, how well established is our research in the community and how is it being community driven? Very little of the research I've done in the past has been community driven. However, it has been led by Indigenous researchers like myself and we are more than happy to go and work with communities and try to convince them of the authentic nature of what we're trying to do. What's missing in the big puzzle is, how do we respond to community initiatives or community ideas about what research they'd like done?

***RQ Do you think some of the community driven element is met, with yourself as a researcher and a community member, giving your input, even if it's not community originated research? Does your input give it an element of that?***

**JE** There are elements of it. I wouldn't say it's completely devoid. I would imagine a lot of people in communities are saying the research we're doing around type two diabetes is fantastic and we should be doing more of it. However, the genesis of that research doesn't come from a community organisation or the Aboriginal Medical Service.

What I would like to see us do in the future, one of the big projects, would be to have a research compact with the community, either at a local level, or a much broader level. The community comes to us and says, these are the big picture things we want research done on, which part of this can you do? And how might we do that in the future? We could go to somewhere like the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) and say, what is the big picture research you need to be done? What is really important to you? Then we could respond.

***RQ Also working with them to develop their own ethics, which everybody has to follow as well.***

**JE** What we should be doing as our big research push into the future, would be working with Aboriginal community and teaching them about research, helping them to develop their

own research approaches, and us being responders to them. For example I've just responded to the Ian Potteer Foundation for a type two diabetes research project. We can say we've got just the project for that, a community is active in this area, this is the sort of research they want to be done. Or maybe, a Lands Council comes to us and says, we've really got some difficulties here with our housing infrastructure and this is the state of our housing, what advice can you provide us, and how could that be turned into research?

One of the things we have to do with the New South Wales State Government is engagement work with communities, running off the back of the productivity Commission's recent ideas about what evaluation and research should look like. That is the next big piece of work that universities should be doing, both individually and collectively; a compact with Aboriginal organisations. There are some types of research that Aboriginal communities will quite happily be involved in. However, if they don't like the research then they use descriptions, like, we've been researched too much, or this is just you guys looking after your careers. In some ways that's a valid argument. I think it's a much better position to conduct research that supports communities, what they want to do, and they use us as a conduit for that.

***RQ How have you engaged your own knowledge about community, or other people like individuals, Aboriginal senior people or knowledge holders or community members or other people with expertise to develop a research idea? Have there been cultural or language issues you've thought about as you're working an idea up?***

**JE** The Elite Athlete Program was research that didn't involve talking to community leaders or Elder's. It was really about talking to individual rugby league and AFL players. This is the sort of research that is in a different hemisphere than what I would call genuine community based research. The other piece of work, on the analysis of sports, we used databases to scope out the work and try to present that work in a

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positive light. For instance, the work we did on a cluster analysis of the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children, was about trying to demonstrate the positive impact that sport and physical activity had on the educational outcomes of Indigenous kids. That was quite a positive outcome of the research. We didn't go and talk to community leaders about that, or community Elders, because it was an LSIC itself, managed overall by an Indigenous Community Reference Group. We had ethics clearance through the university, and I'm not saying we've abrogated our responsibilities, but it's hard to know what local engagement you would have to do because it's a national survey and has a National Advisory Group attached. In that situation I went back and talked to what they call the Rayos', which is the Aboriginal Field Officers, about that research and talked to them about what the research meant and what the data looked like.

We did not consult, in those two projects, with a genuine community base, and that is a kind of a gap in the research. If you're dealing with a national database, like ABS, or Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children, or the Hilda Survey, because you're dealing with those databases, there's no local community organiser for which to consult with. It's the same with the rugby league players because you're dealing with them individually, as people. I've worked with rugby league players like Dean Widders and Georgie Rose, and I deal with them on a personal level. So who would be the point of consultation if it wasn't with those players directly? So there are some interesting anomalies with this.

The view we have taken in both of those projects was for it to be Indigenous lead and to have some benefit to the community by understanding the issues associated with them.

So I didn't really consult with an organisation or Elders, which you would possibly do if it was a community based project.

***RQ That's a really important issue, where you are working with those big data sets. When it is really***

*important to work with them, but you don't have control over how they're collected.*

**JE** We should probably write in the journal articles that come out of those, a recognition that they do have an Indigenous Reference Group attached to them, but they are also big databases that we're trying to use.

I guess that's probably something that could be addressed in data sovereignty and future research. That could be an interesting issue to be canvassed. Because, the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children was set up by an Indigenous person, Mick Dodson, and he has prominent Indigenous Professors on that advisory board, in some ways, so long as we're using the data for good, not evil, then we've met our responsibilities. That would be an interesting discussion to have. At the moment, the assumption is that we have met our ethical responsibilities when we use and publish from data sets.

***RQ** Thinking about the ethical frameworks of the review process, can you talk to us a bit about some of the ethics applications you've done and some of the issues that might have come up there?*

***And any of the feedback you've had from ethics committees, whether it's been useful or how you approached it?***

**JE** The ethics process is quite thorough. And I do admire people who sit on the committees and have to make assessments about them. From my point of view, as a researcher, I just wish it was quicker. I know this opens up for all sorts of abuse, but I would much prefer to be able to sign a declaration that we've met a whole heap of requirements for the research and be able to get going on it.

I'll give you an example of one that I think may be difficult for us going in the future. My PhD student's project is looking at the career transition experiences of Indigenous and Pacifica players. We're going to interview eight Indigenous players and we're going to interview eight Pacifica players. We are going to try and understand what their experiences have been in rugby league and the sorts of enablers and challenges to them finishing; what's happened during their time as rugby league

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players and then moving out into society. Both of those are unique groups of people, there is no real sort of community based group of people who we would initially go and consult with. This has come from discussions with some of those players through previous research that I've done with them. They were saying there are real problems within the system, about them, things like mental health, career planning and life skills that aren't being addressed. Unless you develop your own community for something like that, or your own reference group, and if you're dealing with the whole broad range of guys from all over the state, all over the country, then how representative would be a reference group like that? How big could you make it? I just find the whole process a bit daunting.

***RQ** In an example like that I imagine you and the researcher, because of your own backgrounds, would bring the knowledge of systemic racism and difficulties that people have. Something like a really strict application of an ethics process, or an advisory group might add, you two actually bring that yourselves through your own knowledge to some extent.*

**JE** My view is that you'd like to think that you're doing everything right, as a researcher, when you go down a particular track. I can definitely imagine the application of strict ethics. If you are going into a community and you want to work with a community on the ground. Say, the Wellington Aboriginal Medical Service (AMS) for instance, and you wanted to work on the ground with people who are using the AMS. Say you want to talk to them about their lifestyle issues, you want to talk about social and emotional well being for instance, I think that's where you need a really robust ethics process. That's where I see the real role for ethics.

People who are probably reading this, probably think I'm a heretic, but there are different types of research. I think different types of research require different thinking about what the ethics process is. For instance, if you wanted to go around and interview all of the Indigenous professors in the Australian university system, because you are interested in what enabled them and the challenges they've had, what



their disciplines are and what the opportunities are there. I think that's different than going to an Indigenous community, say, Wellington, or The Lake and going to Murrin Bridge and saying, I'm here to do some research, just pony up and help us out. It's a lot different, they're whole heaps different issues and you need different sets of skills in both those situations.

***RQ What's the difference between the professors and going straight out to community?***

**JE** If I went and interviewed you or Susan Page, you'd have a list of questions that you'd already want to know about the research and be quicker to be involved in the co-design and the reporting on those types of things. You would probably be a lot more informed and much more confident about being involved in research. I went out to Murrin Bridge where a few of the guys have been out to in the past, and established a very good relationship with them around re-designing some of their infrastructure there. But one of the things that they tell me, because I've come late to this particular project, is that a lot of their time is spent just being on the ground, establishing relationships, making sure that people realise that the research is about doing good things in the community and the community prospering from that involvement. Just establishing a long term relationship.

One of the public things that we can look at, say Larissa's work at Bowraville, for instance. When people think about Bowraville and what happened at Bowraville, everybody thinks about Larissa and UTS and about the great work that she's done there. When you go to a community, you'd like to think that you can establish the same rapport with them that goes for many years afterwards. So that in the future when they're designing other infrastructure projects, or they want some advice, they say, well, let's ring that mob that John Evans established at UTS and maybe they will come out here and help us and be involved. After being to a couple of communities already and seeing what communities have paid for in terms of services to non Indigenous providers, it's just astounding what some of these providers have gotten away with in terms of what they're prepared to charge, to walk away from communities and leave them very little to develop their future infrastructure and housing.

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There's a whole range of things that need to be teased out, and I think it's good that we're talking about it, because I think there's horses for courses, and I think the comparison between me interviewing a whole heap of Indigenous professors and going out to community, I think there's a different skill set altogether and different assumptions you can take and should be taking to those discussions.

***RQ Are there different responsibilities? In your view?***

**JE** Oh, without a doubt. Without a doubt.

***RQ What would they be?***

**JE** If I interview you or Susan Page or, Michael McDaniel, or, Lisa Jackson Pulver, they would almost be running the show in terms of your involvement with them. The narrative would be different. But if you go to a community, and you might go to a community that doesn't have many resources there, your relationship with that group would be a whole heap different and the sorts of assumptions that you would have would be challenged when you go there.

***RQ Do you want to talk to us a bit about the responsibilities in relation to data collection, data storage, data safety, returning data to community, or how you manage the data that you collect from your research?***

**JE** In the ethics process, you have to guarantee the safety of that data and I think that's an imperative, you have to do it. By and large, most of that storage is on your laptop or your computer at work or you put it on a hard drive and lock it away. That's the extent of the security when it comes to storing the data. I think that's an important thing to do.

Where you work with people in the community, that data should get back to them in the form of transcripts or the analysis that you've done. And there should be a way to undertake some sort of community engagement as a result of that. For instance, we are conducting interviews with people with type two diabetes who've got off insulin and metformin. We would like to establish a group of people and develop some sort of webinar. We also want to go to communities

where we've done the work and be able to say, well, look, you know, here's Aunty Flo, she was terribly overweight, she's been through this progress, and now she's off insulin and metformin, this is what she did. I think that's the responsibility you have in terms of going back to community and doing those sorts of things.

***RQ Would you like to reflect on sharing and translating the results into action some more?***

**JE** There are some elements of this that are really easy to do and there are also some that are really complicated. For instance when we produce the journal article on cluster analysis of kids and academic performance, that's in the academic environment. But has that really influenced the government's policy making around sport and physical activity? If you go to their latest strategy around sport and physical activity there is no mention in there about Indigenous participation in sport and physical activity. And the place where it does get a mention is a reference to Robert Decostello's marathon project.

One of the things we said wanted to do was influence government policy making and we failed dismally. We failed dismally there with good articles and you'll find it hard to challenge the veracity of the results that we've got. I think we need to be quite blunt about it. Unless you've got other ways to get that message out to politicians, invariably, a lot of that research falls on deaf ears in terms of making changes to policy. We should be making changes to the national sports policy, and we should be doing things differently.

You need to work out who's reading your research. How do you get in front of the appropriate minister, for instance the Department of Health and what they are reading, unless you know someone personally in Indigenous Health or the health research area? You might say, this is a really good idea, how can we improve the amount and quality of physical activity that kids are getting throughout Australia and in Indigenous communities? I have to say, hand on heart and that I haven't affected any policy change through the work that I've done.

***RQ Yet, it makes a building block for the next person.***

**JE** It may also be the building block for more debate about the things that I raised in there. Maybe people can find holes in the research, can say, look, maybe you overstated some of these things. Or the things that you've used to argue for the things you've argued for aren't relevant enough. Maybe there's other things we should be doing. So that's really good. If you take a project where you've worked with community on the ground and you're able to go back and affect change through talking to them, engaging with them, and producing material, which can help drive community projects, then that's different. That's the whole other end of the spectrum. That's the stuff that we've got more control over and it's the stuff we should be better at.

***RQ When I talk to you and I reflect on myself as somebody who's done some research, my observation is, you have this real willingness to say, maybe I'm not right.***

**JE** I think you have to. I think any academic has to. One of the things I'm seeing, especially in type two diabetes research, is all these guys out there beating their chest. And a lot of people would say look at all those hairy arse men making all these claims about things and they may not be right. Go back to the studies around thalidomide. You have to be very careful about the sorts of statements you make and the proclamations you make about your work, because they are, in my view, always provisional.

***RQ Do you think that's specific to health or specific to research overall?***

**JE** I think in lots of domains. It's the way we should be thinking about our work. Because things do change. If there was only one vaccine for COVID we'd be looking pretty good. But we've got eight or 10 different groups thinking about what that vaccine would look like. So not one of them are categorically going to say, our vaccine is going to work, because there's other factors that influence the research that underpins it and what might change over time. The virus might mutate, it might change, it may affect different groups

of people differently. You have to take the position that your work is provisional and what you rely on is other people testing what you say in your research, getting similar or the same results, or rejecting them. So long as they've got good basis to reject it, we shouldn't take those things personally. I certainly wouldn't. If someone came out tomorrow and said, all the research you've done in physical activity in the past is crap, John, and this is the reason why, I'd go, oh well, show me why and then, okay, well, maybe you're right, maybe we've got to change tack or maybe we have to do things differently. But I think you do have to take that position of being provisional about where your research is at.

*RQ It's a very non-ego way. When we talk about community driven research, we talk about research that is about people building careers. But that provisional approach is*

*about really putting your ego in the*

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*back pocket and saying, it might help my career, but I'm also willing to for somebody else to show something really different.*

**JE** I think we get into trouble if we don't. If we steadfastly welded on to our views it gives rise to hubris coming before the fall and that arrogance about the work we do, the highbrow idea. When you are found wrong, it's a very degrading situation for yourself, because you haven't entertained the fact that you might actually be wrong. And even within community driven research, things change.

If you have been in a community, doing really good research, changing the dynamics in the community because of the work you've done, you might start getting better results. You look at the stuff you were doing and you go, well hang on, that may have worked 20 years ago, but look at the community now, they're thriving in this area. So to take that same approach you did before wouldn't work. You've got to think of new ideas. Is it Einstein who said, you don't solve today's problems with yesterday's thinking. And you do need to be evolving in your thinking about your research.

*RQ Were there any other experiences or tips for new players that you wanted to share?*

**JE** Ethics is a much more complicated area than people give it credit for. I fundamentally agree with the whole idea about ethics and about working with community.

There are going to be situations where the point is defined by a community based project is tested. I'd like to think that in the future, if I wanted to go and research something, especially with Indigenous rugby league or AFL, then the ethical situation doesn't prevent me from doing it. On the flip side of that, I think that we should be working with Indigenous communities, in their organisations and teaching them about what the research process is, so they can design the sorts of research that's going to solve the problems that they think they've got on the ground. And that's a whole heap different than some of the other research that goes on in a whole range of Indigenous areas.